

Dresden

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4719944) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/4719944>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Categories:	M/M , Multi
Fandom:	Shingeki no Kyojin Attack on Titan
Relationship:	Levi/Erwin Smith
Characters:	Levi (Shingeki no Kyojin) , Erwin Smith
Additional Tags:	World War II , Alternate Universe , Historical
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Dresden
Collections:	Erwin Smith x Levi Ackerman
Stats:	Published: 2015-09-03 Completed: 2016-11-18 Words: 334,478 Chapters: 26/26

Dresden

by [hedera_helix](#)

Summary

When Levi acquired his false identification he knew that the key to survival would be to stay unnoticed and to contain the bitterness and anger he feels inside himself. As the tides of war start to turn against Germany, however, Levi finds himself in a position to make a choice.

- Translation into Deutsch available: [Dresden \(Übersetzung\)](#) by [chopzoe](#)
- Translation into Português europeu available: [Dresden \(Tradução\)](#) by [O meu país é o que o mar não quer \(HannibalCatharsis\)](#)
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Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

This is my first full-length eruri-fic that I'm working on. I've written several chapters in advance and I will be posting them biweekly. The fic itself is going to be max. 15 chapters. I personally dislike warnings, because I feel they give away too much, but if there's something to warn against in the chapters, please take note of the warnings at the end of the chapter in the author's notes. Hope ya'll enjoy it!

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi looks at the stains on the kitchen floor for a few seconds longer than usual and it occurs to him he can't remember when he last scrubbed them. It's been so long he can't even remember what the stains are from; was that big brown one from the time Isabel spilled her soup or from when Levi nearly knocked over that cup of grain coffee? The latter must have been weeks ago – they've not had ration cards for substitute in a while – but the stain is still there.

As he makes his way to the table, Levi realises dully that he's gotten so used to dodging it that he barely notices the change in his step. He sits down next to Farlan, moving his porridge around his plate unenthusiastically to cool it down. For a moment he thinks about asking what happened to the milk he bought the day before but knows Isabel must have given it to Frau Gernhardt again; there is no denying her children need it more than they do, so he lets it go.

“Isabel left already?” he asks Farlan, who hums in agreement.

“Said she was going to see Herr Schild about that dog of his.”

Levi grunts a reply before eating a spoonful of runny porridge that tastes of nothing in particular. She's been doing that for weeks now, ever since she found the animal lying behind some rubbish bins she was going through – and how many times has Levi told her not to do that? – and tracked down the owner to get the dog home safely. It's better than sitting indoors all day, and certainly better than stealing food for their hungry neighbours so Levi says nothing to her about it, especially since Herr Schild lets her eat from his rations whenever he can spare it. For the first few weeks he kept a close eye on her whenever she returned from one of those trips to see if anything about her behaviour was radically different and once he even joined her in an attempt to put his doubts about the man to rest. Herr Schild turned out

to be in his seventies, a widower whose only joys in life were that dog of his, and a daily visit from the one daughter who still lived close enough to visit him.

“You going out today?” Levi asks Farlan, trying to keep his voice conversational, but the other man looks up from his book, his face startled all of a sudden.

“I wasn’t planning on...” he starts, meeting Levi’s eyes hesitantly before deciding, “No. Not today.” There’s an edge to his voice and a part of Levi feels sorry he ever asked. “You?”

Levi nods. “I’ll try and find some work,” he replies.

It’s a constant nagging thought these days, find some work, something to do, anything to keep you from staying indoors, and he can’t understand how Farlan can stand it, staying in the apartment every day, reading his books and writing. What’s there to write about? Nothing ever happens to him these days. Levi finishes his meagre breakfast and leaves him to it regardless. After all, there’s nothing he can say to change how he is, and who’s he to say Farlan’s not the smartest one of them all for how he lives?

He runs into Frau Niemeyer from one floor down in the stairs after a visit to the communal bathroom – unpleasant as ever. She’s clutching a letter in her hand and he wonders if she’s finally heard from her son, the one who was sent to Buchenwald two years ago for some petty crime she won’t talk about. She stops him by his arm with that piercing look in her eye and asks, “How’s that cough of yours these days?”

Levi tries to smile. “Better, since the weather’s getting warmer,” he explains briefly, glad to be able to stop the fake coughing for a few months; Frau Niemeyer, a devout busybody, in particular doesn’t need to know the army didn’t reject him for an unspecified lung disease.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she tells him with a hint of a smile. “I saw your little brother running outside earlier,” she goes on, though he has started descending the stairs. “You really ought to keep a better eye on him, you know.”

Levi nods wordlessly, wondering how much longer Isabel will be able to keep up that particular charade. “I’ll tell him to be more careful,” he promises the old woman, who’s still not done with him it seems.

“And what about that friend of yours?” she asks next, lingering on the steps above Levi now, her hand clutching the railing. “I haven’t seen him around in a long time.”

Levi can feel his brows furrowing. “He found out his brother died last month,” he says; the lies come so effortlessly these days. “He was in Leningrad. That’s the last of his family gone now. He hasn’t been feeling well since.”

Frau Niemeyer’s expression is full of the sort of sympathy they all have for other people’s bad news these days; superficial, and secretly glad the misfortune has hit someone else this time. “I’m sorry to hear that,” she expresses, cocking her head to one side. “That weak mind of his is such a shame in a strong, handsome man like him. But still, who can blame his parents for not sending him to an institution? The cost of those places! Had I been able to afford it that’s what I would’ve done with my Stefan.” She stops for a while, her expression

growing distant for a moment before she seems to return to present day. “He still has that aunt in Berlin, doesn’t he? Maybe they can be a comfort to each other.”

“I hope so,” Levi says, trying to get his voice to convey even a hint of emotion which, even after all these years, is not an easy task.

“Well, I don’t want to keep you too long,” she finally sighs, picking her groceries up from the floor. “Heil Hitler.”

“Heil Hitler,” Levi replies routinely before making his way downstairs and out onto the street; the day will be sunny but there’s a cold breeze in the air even so early in the morning, and Levi turns up his coat collar against it as he starts walking down the street.

He goes around the local businesses first, asking for anything to do, but no one has need for help these days, they’ve all learned to get by without extra hands. The factories are the same as ever, turning away anyone who looks like they should have a gun in their hand instead. Levi decides to try further across town, crossing the Elbe along the Augustus Bridge and walking past the old town, not stopping until a shout erupts behind him.

“Hey you! Shorty!”

Some instinct makes Levi turn around and his breath hitches in his throat as soon as he sees the grey uniforms. He counts five men, all armed with handguns, their faces split in eerily wide smiles as they lean on the wall by an archway leading to an inner courtyard of a building. One of them signals for Levi to approach and he does hesitantly, though his mind is busily considering running.

“Can I help you with something?” Levi asks as politely as he can, stopping a few metres from the soldiers and trying to keep his voice steady to mask the fact his heart is hammering against his ribs.

“Yes, I think you can.” One of the men has stepped forward, and though the patch on his collar is plain black, Levi can guess he’s the highest ranking of the group. What worries him more than the man’s status is what the plain black patch signifies: these men are Gestapo.

“What is it then?” Levi inquires, squinting as the sun pierces the clouds, obscuring the men from his view. He can feel his armpits beginning to itch from sweat and he fights to keep the nervousness on his face at an appropriate amount. After all, no one wants to seem too collected before people like these.

“If you could kindly show me your papers.”

Levi’s mind is full of choice swear words as he fights to keep his hands steady, pulling his papers out of his pocket; he got them long ago, before he left Berlin, and he knows the information is dated, inaccurate as it was in the first place. His left hand is nervously gripping the handle of a small knife he has slipped in the pocket of his slacks before leaving the house. The officer peers down at his identification for a good twenty seconds during which Levi’s eyes scan the rest of the group as discreetly as possible. His mind is working feverishly,

calculating outcomes and formulating plans, trying to keep from considering that one irrevocable but very possible ending to the situation.

“If you could tell me your name,” he commands Levi, who scoffs.

“What, you can’t read?” he asks before he can stop himself, like his nerves have won over reason for a second. The man in the uniform looks at him sternly, his face growing red with anger already. “Theodore Mertz,” Levi replies before the man can speak.

“Says here you’re from Berlin.” The man passes the papers over to a more junior officer, who turns it toward the sun before examining it.

“I moved here after my parents died,” Levi lies, keeping his face impassive. His eyes stop to follow a young woman in a grey dress as she passes on the street between Levi and the soldiers, gloved hands clutching the handle of her purse while her gaze never rises from the cobbled stones.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” the man says, sounding everything but as he nods along with Levi’s words. “How did they pass? If you don’t mind my asking.”

“Carbon monoxide poisoning,” Levi replies, knowing he sounds too indifferent as the officer’s eyebrows climb towards his hairline. “They got stuck in an air-raid shelter.”

“And you weren’t with them?”

Levi’s eyes follow the junior officer as he passes the papers on to yet another soldier, pointing at something in them and uttering a laugh and Levi hopes he’s just making a joke of his height. The other soldier doesn’t seem as amused but grabs the papers from his hand, his eyes passing to Levi’s face and back, like he’s trying to determine how well it matches the picture on the paper. Levi rips his gaze off him to turn back to the man speaking.

“I was across town,” he explains, trying to keep it brief. “Visiting my uncle Kenny.”

“Visiting your uncle Kenny,” the officer repeats, his smile widening. “Well, wasn’t that nice of you. I must admit, there is one thing in all of this that I don’t understand.”

Levi tries to keep his breathing steady; he can feel the handle of the knife growing wet from his sweaty palm as he stares at the man, trying to anticipate his next words. Will he point out something in Levi’s papers, some discrepancy that he’s missed? He swallows arduously and takes a deep breath to ease the disorientation caused by his frantically beating heart.

“How come you haven’t been conscripted?” the officer asks him, keeping his tone oddly polite. “Surely the boys over at the war office didn’t turn you away just because you’re so short, did they?”

Levi shakes his head. “I have a lung disease,” he says, hoping the brief explanation will do. His mind is repeating the sentence, like trying to direct his attention to something he just can’t seem to catch.

“How unfortunate,” the officer comments and to Levi his voice sounds alarmingly mocking. He sighs tiredly as someone passes Levi’s papers back to him and starts peering down at them again. “What type of lung disease?”

Levi’s hand grips the knife as his brain works feverishly to come up with any kind of illness that has anything to do with lungs, and by the time he blurts out, “Consumption” he knows he’s already taken too long to reply. The officer looks up from the documentation with an almost bored sort of glee in his eyes, gesturing for Levi to walk closer. He takes a tentative step backwards instead.

“Come here,” he orders Levi now, making him take another step back.

“What for?” he asks, keeping his voice steady, though he can’t remember the last time he felt so afraid. The officer’s face grows instantly impatient.

“We need to make sure of something,” he explains, his voice suddenly sharp. Levi’s gaze slips from him to the other soldiers, who are starting to approach him slowly, like people walk toward animals they’re trying to catch.

“I already showed you my papers,” Levi tries now, getting desperate. “Whatever you need to know should be in there, shouldn’t it?”

The officer stands up straighter and sighs again, following the people walking along the street around them, mothers with their children, younger women off to have their lunch in some little café by the river. Levi senses the way they’re not looking at them, like they’ve all learned not to look when things like this happen in broad daylight, but his own eyes are drawn to the officer’s hand that comes down to the holster of his handgun.

“I need you to pull down your pants,” the man tells him, his gloved fingers playing with the clasp of the holster. “Now, you can either do it here on the street, or in that archway where it’s a bit more private.”

Levi is barely aware of holding his breath as he stares at the officer in disbelief. From the corner of his eye he can see the other soldiers drawing nearer.

“I’m not doing that,” he tells the man quietly; the words seem to grate his throat as they squeeze their way out.

“And why not?”

“Because it’s fucking degrading, that’s why,” Levi insists, though he knows full well that’s not the reason why he has to resist the order. He remembers hearing one of his neighbours mentioning something like this happening, but at the time he thought he had simply invented the story as some kind of a disturbing joke.

“Or because you have something to hide,” the officer counters, frowning suddenly as his eyes find focus somewhere around Levi’s hips. “What do you keep fiddling with in that pocket?”

Levi tries to look as innocent and unconcerned as he can, but by the time he's blurted out, "Nothing", he knows he's hesitated for a second too long. As soon as he takes another step back a soldier has grabbed his arm and pulled the knife out of his pocket.

"What have we here then?" the officer drawls lazily just as Levi throws his weight back toward the man holding him; they both fall down but Levi lands on his side, rolling swiftly onto his feet and tearing down the street.

He can hear the men shouting behind him, the stomping of heavy footsteps as they start their pursuit, but he has a head start and he knows this game, though it's been years since he's had to flee on foot. Levi can feel the strength in his legs as he runs, that thrilling sense of ability and power that reminds him of how things used to be, and he feels like smiling even with the pursuers hard on his heels. He knows that feeling will be gone soon; bad food and hard living have taken their toll on him and that coursing energy will wither much faster in his small body than the trained and maintained ones of his chasers.

He takes a right onto an alleyway, sprinting halfway down it before turning left, jumping over a low wall and bolting across a small garden; he can hear dogs barking a short distance away and he swears under his breath as he continues onto an old, cobbled street; the tall buildings keep out the early noon sun and the place is bathing in faint shadows. Levi wonders whether he should slow down to walking, try to look inconspicuous and avoid the soldiers like that, but the street is nearly empty and without many people around the plan is less likely to work. So he keeps his pace and runs forward until he can hear loud voices ahead and the sound of approaching footsteps sends him squeezing through a gap between two buildings; even in the confined space his steps barely slow down, something he wishes will happen with the soldiers who are all likely to be nearly twice his size. Just as he emerges onto the parallel street a shout erupts from behind him.

"There he is!"

Levi swears as he turns left, doubling back and running as fast as he can now. He can hear the deafening bang of a gun being fired that scares a dog into barking, and the sound of the wall behind him crumbling as the bullet hits it is almost muffled in comparison. His heart starts racing even faster, there is a rush of blood to his legs as he struggles to think straight. He doesn't know this side of town so well, hasn't learned all the good places to hide and he feels it's just his luck getting checked here. As he races along the street, his feet slipping on the old cobbled stones, he scans ahead; a crossroads between the buildings, he can turn left or right. Or...

Right ahead is a two-storey residential building surrounded by a garden wall, not very high and not very thick, and above it something catches Levi's eye; a strip of curtain, drawn out of the open window by the morning breeze. The plan is terrible, he knows it as soon as he thinks it, thinks again about turning right since turning left is no longer an option and, reaching the crossroads, spots an empty wooden cart by the wall ahead. Before he can think further he's leapt on it and jumped, grabbed a firm hold of the top of the wall and pulled himself up, ran along it for a few metres and hurdled his body across thin air, clutching on to the railing around a small French balcony before climbing, balancing himself with effort, onto the fencing and bounded toward the open window, throwing his body through it mere seconds

before the pounding of footsteps starts to gather outside the wall; he sits down on the floor under the window, fighting for breath, his chest and throat burning for air, nearly raising tears to his eyes as he tries to keep himself from gasping.

Beyond his own quiet panting Levi can hear the soldiers asking each other where he's gone, and from what he can gather they've taken a longer route instead of the narrow passageway that he himself used, which must have assured his escape. The dog barks and whines, nearly drowning out the shouts of the soldiers.

"Fucking Nazis," he swears under his breath, only now turning to inspect the room he's in; the first thing he sees is the barrel of a handgun, aimed steadily between his eyes.

Slowly, like fearing that shifting his gaze will be too sudden a move, Levi's eyes begin to scan the man holding the gun: tall, strong body, much stronger than his no doubt, trousers and boots of a military uniform, the rest of the regimentals placed neatly on a hanger to his right, an officer's hat sitting on a wooden dresser. Outside the apartment he can hear someone pointing out the open window; the soldiers are arguing about whether or not he could have made it through. Levi sits incredibly still, his thoughts on the knife those Gestapo fucks took from him and he can't even think far enough to curse the situation he's in.

"I see they're talking about you," the man says, his voice low and steady.

The gun looks heavy but stays eerily still in his hand and Levi fights to take his eyes off it to scan the man and the room more closely. There's a washstand behind him with a mirror above, the art deco style frames seem oddly old-fashioned; Levi has caught the man shaving his face, traces of the foamy soap he's used still linger on his cheeks and chin. His blond hair is neatly combed, heavy eyebrows are knitted sternly above bright blue eyes, he's wearing dark grey braces, the shine on his boots is impeccable. The bedroom is austere but comfortable, not overly crowded with things, just a few essential furnishings, not a touch of the feminine as far as Levi can see it, but he likes it, appreciates the simplicity. There's a bed to their left, made with precision and care, no lamps on the night stands, just a single candle in a white enamel holder; the bottom of it is carved like a seashell with furrows widening toward the brim – it reminds Levi painfully of that sad little trip to the seaside, the only one his mother ever took him on, though he can't understand why he'd think of that now.

All this Levi takes in as his gaze bounces around the room, always coming back to the gun, and he wonders why this is all so vivid, why he would notice any of this now, why he's not looking for doors or windows or things to throw toward the man, anything that would give him even the minutest chance of escape. He looks at the gun again, realises that it's loaded and decides: this is how he dies, and what a rotten end to it all, and finding such beauty in this shitty, mediocre furniture is probably better than having his life flash before his eyes; seeing that second-rate tragedy again seems to him the only thing that could make all of it even more depressing.

Outside on the street men are still talking, debating whether to check the house; one of them is insistent, saying something about Jews and monkeys that doesn't quite register to Levi. The dog keeps barking, at the cart and the wall by the sounds of it, and they come to a decision; Levi starts waiting for those heavy footsteps climbing the stairs.

The man in front of him is like carved from stone, his towering body motionless, his face impassive. When loud knocking finally erupts from his door, he lowers the gun without hesitation.

“Don’t do anything stupid, now,” the man says, turning back to the washstand and drying his face and hands before exiting the bedroom; Levi can tell from the soft metallic noises he waits until he’s outside the door before unloading his gun.

After a few dazed seconds Levi’s body seems to spring to life. He cranes his neck to glance cautiously out of the window; there are two soldiers still patrolling the street beyond the garden wall, and Levi swears under his breath. There are voices carrying in from the front door and Levi listens to the conversation intently; the men who are looking for him sound apologetic, one of them is trying to silence the dog who keeps barking loudly as they speak and Levi remembers those absurd rumours which claim the Gestapo dogs have been trained to recognise the smell of Jews.

“I was wondering about that racket,” the man’s muffled voice carries in as Levi shuffles around the bed toward the washstand as quietly as he can. He stands up hesitantly to find the dull gleam of a razor on the bottom of the basin, daring to think it may be a sign of his luck changing. He grabs it soundlessly with his left hand, drying its mock-ivory handle on a towel; a slippery hold won’t do with a blade this sharp.

He circles the room slowly, positioning himself in the space by the dresser, behind the door. He listens to the conversation while fighting to think, to calculate the motives behind the man not immediately turning him in to the Gestapo. Him being the world’s one and only good-hearted Nazi doesn’t sound like a reasonable explanation.

“I can’t say I’ve seen anything out of the ordinary,” the owner of the apartment says, sounding as disinterested as ever. “I’m sorry I can’t help you.”

The dog’s barking has turned into low growling and whining; Levi can hear its claws furiously scratching the floor and he feels a drop of sweat falling down his temple.

“Would you mind us taking a closer look? The assailant is small, and you know how these Jew rats can hide,” another man asks laughing a little at his own joke, which is followed by a tense silence.

“Clearly that won’t be necessary,” another, more nervous voice joins the conversation. Someone pulls the dog away from the door; its barking echoes in the hallway, almost drowning out the man’s words.

“It seems *Rottenführer* is forgetting his rank and mine,” Levi can hear the man state sharply, like he’s making a point of something. “I expect you to manage the noise from now on.”

“Yes, sir. Excuse us, sir,” one of the soldiers has a chance to apologise before the door is closed.

Levi’s body grows tense as he realises the man will be returning and he changes his hold on the razor nervously, gripping the handle against his palm, the dull side of the blade brushing

against his wrist. His breathing quickens as he hears the man approaching the bedroom. Levi has time for a second of reflection, an oddly calm notion of how quickly he's breaching that gap from dying to taking a life; the door starts to open, Levi's body grows light with strength, with anger, with survival, and he attacks. He aims high, for the throat, but misjudges the distance; the man dodges the blow effortlessly, grabbing Levi's arm with terrifying force. What follows is a soundless struggle, unbalanced and short-lived. There is no advantage for Levi to seize, and after mere seconds the man has twisted his arm forcefully behind his back, pressed him firmly against the dresser and pulled the razor from his hand.

"This is precisely what I meant," the man whispers before the painful grip on Levi's arm disappears. When he turns around he sees the man closing the window and pulling the plain white curtain to cover it. "They'll stay in the area for a while. Ideally you should wait until it gets dark," he suggests, turning to face Levi's disbelief with an almost serene indifference before uttering simply, "Perhaps you'd like to sit down while you wait."

Suddenly, like following a command, Levi's legs buckle and he falls on the floor by the dresser. Weakness and shudders come in the wake of that stubborn survival leaving his limbs, and Levi tries to remember the last warm meal he had that wasn't potatoes. Leftover ham and turnips from Krieger, but he'd given nearly all of it to Isabel and Farlan, and that was five days ago now. Alms from a Nazi, just like this, this man suffering him to exist; the resentment comes uninvited, and Levi feels like shouting, like hitting something or somebody, like maiming and killing and showing the world his rage, all the anger born from this heinous idiocy, this vile small-mindedness that in the span of his youth has robbed him of every prospect, every expectation, every ounce of excitement for what his adult years might hold. Levi can sense the man watching him but refuses to look up; the worst thing would be to see pity in the eyes of someone like him.

"Perhaps we ought to have a cup of coffee," the man says. "Or perhaps you'd like something to eat? How long has it been since you had a proper meal?"

Levi stays quiet, out of stubbornness if not surprise and the man sighs heavily.

"Surely there's no reason why we can't act like civilised people," he continues. "Even in these circumstances."

Levi scoffs at his choice of words. "Civilised?" he replies derisively. "I don't think someone like you should be using a word like that."

"Says the man who tried to kill me not five minutes ago," the man reminds Levi, who can't help looking up at that.

"You tried to kill me first," he argues, not realising how childish he sounds until the man's mouth twists to a hint of a smile.

"I threatened your life, yes," the man says, and Levi registers only now how foreign his Austrian accent sounds – and how nauseatingly familiar, "but only I know whether my intention was indeed to end it. If you think about it logically, it would have been much easier for me to hand you over to our esteemed friends over there."

Levi feels something shifting in his mind, like something heavy has suddenly let go of him, the emergence of the feeling of futility that follows the kind of rage that can't be expressed and is still seeking for direction and focus; there is a wariness that lingers, however, a mistrust that he isn't sure he will ever be able to fully shake after everything he's seen, all the ugliness of the world. The man doesn't tell Levi he is safe, and by now he doesn't need to. Levi sighs and pushes himself up from the floor, walking out into a sitting room which is similarly furnished with that military austerity.

"I don't like coffee," he says to the man in passing, and hears him scoff quietly.

"Perhaps tea then," he barely comments as he follows Levi and walks past him into a kitchen. Levi sits down on a sofa to wait; the man returns a few minutes later with a pot of tea and two surprisingly delicate cups, parts of a matching set. He pours out the tea through strainers, Levi adds milk to his and leans back against the sofa.

"I did try to kill you, you know," he tells the man, though he's not sure why and he's not sure he means it.

"Oh, I don't doubt that," he replies politely, mixing his tea slowly with a spoon. "That survival instinct of yours is quite remarkable. I've not encountered one as strong as yours in someone like you before." After Levi makes no reply save for a hint of a frown the man continues. "How did you manage the wall? I'd imagine it would be impossible to climb for someone your size."

"There was an old cart by it. I jumped from there," Levi explains matter-of-factly, but his brows don't unfurrow.

There is something so ridiculous about it, sitting in the apartment of a Nazi officer, sipping tea and discussing this, whether they'd really meant to kill each other, like they were talking about the fucking weather. The man has thrown one of his legs over the other and seems both oddly relaxed and strangely formal; the white under shirt he's wearing looks out of place with his military posture, and Levi feels he'd look more appropriate in a suit, or even donning the rest of that revolting uniform. Something about the man's previous statement has gotten stuck in his mind, something irritating and obnoxious, but Levi can't put his finger on it, and he lets it go as the man continues.

"Quite a jump," the man compliments him, and Levi scoffs again, confused by the comment though he doesn't mind it. "So how long has it been? Since your last proper meal, that is."

Something in Levi wants to rebel and let the man know he'd rather eat his own sick than accept food from a Nazi bastard like him, but the hypocrisy in that has started to outweigh the strength he finds in disobedience. He was like that before, when he was younger and the restrictions started pouring in and he vowed never to bow down to a single one of them. It felt like resistance in those days, he thought unjust laws like that should not be obeyed under any circumstances, and he held on to that notion even when Kenny called him a coward and told him to be proud of his heritage. Levi still can't decide whether he is a coward for living in hiding like he does, doing everything he can not to end up like the rest of them. Maybe it is about survival, like the man said, an animal instinct telling him to keep breathing for as long

as he can even when stretching out his miserable existence seems to serve no purpose; maybe at the end of the day he doesn't even have a choice.

"What are you having?" Levi finally asks, sipping at his tea tentatively.

The man smiles. "I'm afraid I won't be able to respond to dietary restriction on such short notice," he replies and Levi can't quite tell whether he's joking or not, "but I'm fortunate in having enough to share, even if the food itself is nothing special."

Levi's thoughts return to the man's motives again, but trying to find any reason or logic behind the actions of a Nazi seems like a waste of time; who knows why they do anything, why they kill some and spare others, what fuels that hate they have for everyone not exactly like them. Maybe the man is trying to ease his conscience, just like Krieger always says he is, though he seems to lack that nervous outpour of emotion that's so characteristic of the other.

"I guess beggars can't be choosers," says Levi, taking a gulp of his tea; it's been a while since he's had proper tea like this, with a hint of bergamot that gives the milk that creamy aftertaste. He can't help smiling into his cup.

"Yes," the man replies almost casually. "These are trying times. We all must make sacrifices in times of war."

"Some more than others."

The man laughs joylessly. "Such is the nature of this world, and the nature of us who inhabit it," he states, his voice growing strangely emotionless again. He empties his cup and stands up, towering over Levi as he says, "If you'll excuse me, I have some work to attend to. Please feel free to make yourself at home, as far as you're able."

The man walks across the room to a little nook with a plain, dark wooden secretaire which he unlocks before folding out the writing top and unlocking the uppermost drawer and pulling out some papers. Levi sips his tea and watches the man as he sits down – his heavy, muscular body seems almost too big for the chair – and starts to write, page after page by hand, stopping every now and again to replace the cartridge of ink in his pen.

After a while he pulls a small typewriter out of another drawer and keeps on working, pulling out papers and folders, signing things, making copies, things you'd expect someone like him to leave to a secretary; somewhere in the back of his mind Levi wonders whether the papers are top secret, something that would take down the whole Nazi regime should it fall into the wrong hands. It's an entertaining thought, made better by the warmth of the apartment compared to Levi's own, which is only now starting to warm up after the cold winter months. Despite the circumstance Levi finds himself growing relaxed and tired from the comfortable warmth and the steady clicking and crunching of the typewriter; there is something calming about the sound, something reassuring, and after a while he falls asleep.

He wakes up to a nudge on his shoulder several hours later, jumping at the touch despite its polite gentleness. The man stands in front of him and Levi pulls away from him instinctively,

struggling for a moment to remember where he is; his head feels heavy with sleep, like he's been woken up in the middle of a dream. It's clear he's slept more soundly here of all places than he has in weeks anywhere else. His mouth opens to a wide yawn as the man gestures toward the kitchen.

"I've prepared some dinner," he says in that same, neutral tone from before.

"What time is it?" Levi asks, disoriented; the sun has moved to shine in through the windows in a bleeding palette of early evening.

"Just past five," the man replies as Levi gets on his feet, stretching his back and arms. "The bathroom is through there if you'd like to wash up." He points toward the short hallway leading to the front door.

Levi follows his directions almost eagerly, stepping into the small room and locking the door behind himself. Unlike the apartment would suggest, the bathroom is larger than Levi assumed but equally ascetically furnished – a toilet, a basin, a bathtub, a corner cupboard for towels and things and a door leading to the bedroom in the far corner – but the privacy of it makes it seem almost lavish. Levi turns the tap, running water into the basin for a moment before sitting down on the toilet to relieve himself, his eyes examining the clean white porcelain of the bathtub enviously. He realises it must be years now since he's had a proper bath, the kind he used to have back in Berlin where he'd soak in the tub for nearly half an hour, then change the water and stay in it until it got cool again – the only indulgence his uncle ever allowed in the house. In those days bathing was about more than just getting clean, but necessity has made an enemy of that sort of luxury. After concluding his business Levi washes his hands for a good half a minute, reapplying soap three times and keeping the water as warm as he can bear before turning the cold tap and splashing some cool water on his face. He dries himself on a clean towel from the corner cupboard; it smells faintly of lavender of all things.

When he sits down at the dinner table the man offers him the first serve of a leg of lamb and some root vegetables. Levi piles the food on his plate enthusiastically and digs in, savouring the meat in particular, though after being reheated from the day before the flesh has dried and become tough and stringy. As he eats Levi looks again at the other man, eyes mapping out the broadness of those shoulders and the neatness of his hair; he doesn't even seem to have a single strand of those thick eyebrows out of place. The man reminds Levi of those posters for the Hitler Jugend he used to see posted about and in truth there is nothing about him that doesn't make him the perfect figurehead for the Aryan master race; tall, muscular, exceedingly handsome with that natural authority, a built-in military presence. Levi supposes that does the trick for quite a few people these days – hell, it might have worked on him in another life – but as things stand it's hard to admire those qualities in anyone, no matter how non-threateningly they are presented. The man pays Levi no mind until he thinks to break the silence.

"I heard our troops in Italy have had a bad run of it," Levi says conversationally.

The man looks up from his dinner with a serious expression. "I'd rather not talk about the war, if that's alright by you," he replies; Levi doesn't know why he's expected the man to sound angry, or why he's a touch disappointed that he doesn't.

Levi scoffs. "An army officer who'd rather not talk about the war," he says with a laugh. "You must be shit at your job."

The man places his knife and fork down on his plate with an audible *clink*. "I am very good at my job," he counters, still equally impassive as he wipes the corners of his mouth with a white, linen napkin, "but I'd rather not talk about work right now." He continues eating, pausing after a moment to add, "And I don't think it's the best topic for a dinner table."

"I don't know," Levi disagrees quietly. "I think it's still better than me talking about the great dump I took in your toilet just now."

There's another audible *clink* as the man lowers his utensils; Levi can see he struggles to swallow the food in his mouth. "Now why would you talk about something like that?" he asks, a new impatient edge creeping into his voice. "Especially while we're eating?"

Levi shrugs off the question. "One of the few pleasures left in my life?" he suggests before uttering a laugh. "Who knows? Maybe I just think it's fun to upset people like you."

"People like me?"

He swallows down a lump of potato before repeating, irritated, "Yes, people like you. The people who are actually responsible for the world being such a fucking shit hole for everyone right now."

That bottled-up anger rears its head again and Levi is vaguely aware of the fact he wants the man to disagree, wants to make him listen, wants to shout abuse at him for being so wrong about everything, but to his disappointment he continues eating, cutting small pieces of the lamb with odd precision.

"I understand how that would make you feel better," the man says, leaving it at that, piling parsnip and meat neatly onto his fork while Levi huffs in annoyance. The silence around the table drags on for several minutes before the man sighs and says, "I don't expect you to be grateful for this gesture," he starts as Levi leans his elbow on the table and pulls the last morsel of fat off his piece of lamb, "but your resentment for accepting it is also not my concern. If you feel any shame or bitterness for receiving my help I'd rather you didn't focus on blaming me for offering it."

Levi's brow furrows as he considers these words in the silence that follows, and he's not sure whether he ought to feel ashamed or dismayed, or angry for being lectured about resentment and bitterness by this Nazi asshole, but that indifference that follows in the wake of everything he does these days dilutes his emotions again until all he manages is wordlessly agreeing with the man. After all there is no denying the fact Levi isn't angry with him; it simply feels better to give a form to the faceless evil that continues to poison his life. Never going so far as apologising to someone like this man, Levi picks at what's left of his meal; he can feel the man's eyes on him, as though monitoring his reaction.

"May I give you a piece of advice?" the man suddenly says, forcing Levi's eyes off the shrivelled piece of carrot on his fork. "The next time you attempt attacking someone significantly larger than you with a small weapon such as a knife you shouldn't try charging

in like you did today.” The man’s face is solemn, and his words seem devoid of all sentiment as he continues, “When it comes to plain physical strength and stature you will always be at a disadvantage. However, your size can be an asset if you learn to utilise it.”

“How?” Levi asks, perhaps sounding a touch too enthusiastic, for the man’s mouth curls into a smile that seems oddly out of place after all that lack of emotion.

“Because you are small you will always be faster than someone with my physical built,” he explains, sounding interested in a topic for the first time. “You should learn to use that speed, to sidestep and dodge the direct blows aimed at you. You should keep in mind that someone who is used to taking advantage of their heavy build will be more likely to use blunt force against their opponent.” The man pauses for a moment to refill his glass. “What you should have done today instead of attacking me head on was to attempt getting behind me, to force me in a position where I can’t make use of my upper body strength. You should also keep your knife arm lowered until the last second so as not to offer your opponent an easy way to grab a hold of you – like I did.”

Levi keeps his eyes on the man as he continues to eat his dinner. “Why?” he asks. “Why would you want to give me this kind of advice?”

The man seems to consider these words for a moment as he finishes his last mouthful. “Why not?” he asks back. “I’m just telling you about my observations. Whether you’re able to make use of them is not up to me.” He stands up, emptying his glass before he starts clearing the plates. “Besides, it seems to me you could use the instruction. In case you get into trouble again.”

Levi sneers. “Any instructions on how to dodge bullets?” he asks. “Those Gestapo fucks carry guns, you know.”

The man stops what he’s doing for a moment. “I suppose that does present a different kind of a problem,” he admits before carrying on with taking the dishes into the sink. “Unfortunately I don’t have a ready solution to that particular predicament.”

Levi shrugs and scoffs. “Well, I guess it’s better than nothing,” he says without thanking the man for the advice any than for the dinner, and leaves the kitchen; the man joins him in the sitting room after a moment.

“I’d imagine it’s safe for you to make your way back now,” he estimates, peering out onto the street through a gap in the curtains. “Keep to the busier streets. Avoid drawing attention to yourself.”

“I know what I’m doing,” Levi huffs in annoyance, making the man turn to him; the look on his face is strange, almost surprised, until he smiles again – that odd, misplaced expression that catches Levi’s interest despite everything he has against this person.

“Of course you do,” the man agrees with a hint of laughter in his voice. He crosses the room to Levi swiftly and extends his hand. “All the best,” he says with a smile.

Levi looks at the hand for a moment before shaking it; it feels strange in his, too big and too warm for comfort. “Sure,” he mutters, pulling his hand back quickly and exiting the apartment without delay.

Like the man predicted, Levi makes it back across town without incidents, but when he climbs the stairs to his apartment, he feels the exhaustion of the day spreading across his body, which feels lead-heavy and aching. The first thing to greet him is Farlan’s face, ashen and etched with concern.

“Jesus Christ!” he gasps as Levi closes the door behind himself. “Where the fuck have you been? You said you’d be back by two! Isabel and I have been worried sick—”

“I ran into some trouble,” Levi cuts in as Isabel runs into the room, doubling over with relief as she lays eyes on him.

“—see? She was sure you were lying dead in a ditch somewhere, took everything I had to keep her from coming to look for you,” Farlan continues, pointing at the girl, who springs to life suddenly, running to Levi and wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t come back anymore,” she whispers into his ear, and though Levi knows running late wasn’t his fault, he can’t help feeling a pang of guilt.

“I’m fine,” he promises Isabel softly, leaning his cheek against her head and sighing deeply. “I was just delayed a bit, that’s all.”

She detaches herself slowly, turning away from Levi instantly; he can’t tell if she’s wiping tears from her eyes or just taking a moment to breathe, but he gives her the ten seconds she needs to bounce back. When she finally turns around she’s wearing her usual wide grin.

“Guess what?” she starts excitedly as Levi follows Farlan into the small kitchen, where he has returned to his place by the table to continue his task of shelling peas with a tired look on his face. “I heard Herr Schild say that they’ve sunk another U-boat on the Atlantic! That’ll be the third one this week!”

Levi smiles wanly at her enthusiasm. “That’s great,” he states as he joins Farlan at the table. “What are those for?” he asks, nodding at the peas, hoping an everyday subject will get some of that pain off his face.

“A soup,” Farlan barely replies, keeping his eyes on his hands as Isabel throws herself down on the lumpy little bed behind Levi; the old springs squeak loudly under her weight.

“You know it’s going to be so good, big brother,” she tells him with laughter in her voice. “Just like at Christmas. Only better because the peas are fresh this time. And we’ve got two whole carrots to put in as well.”

Levi yawns and utters a laugh, stretching his arms above his head. “I’m sure it will be great,” he agrees, and Farlan rolls his eyes before smiling.

“I should’ve gotten this on hours ago,” he complains, “but we’ve been so frantic I haven’t been able to get on with it.”

Levi scoffs quietly. “You two really need to get it together,” he scolds them again, like so many times before. “One of these days I might not come back. You can’t just roll over and give up then.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Farlan counters sternly. “It makes you sound like you’ve given up already.” He turns his eyes back on his task almost angrily before muttering, “Besides, you’re upsetting Isabel.”

Behind Levi Isabel snorts loudly and sits up in the bed. “I can speak for myself, you know,” she points out heatedly before lying back down. “You shouldn’t say things like that because they’re not true,” she tells the ceiling without turning to look at either one of them. “Besides, the war will be over soon. It’ll be another month or so and afterwards everything will go back to the way it was. Everything will be great, you’ll see.”

Farlan and Levi exchange a gloomy look but neither of them says anything; Levi wonders how long it’s been now since she started saying that – a year maybe? And there’s that fascination with U-boats being sunk in the Atlantic, like those vessels are the very heart of the war and once they’ve all been blown up, all the rest of the fighting will come to an end. Farlan sighs into his bowl of peas as Levi suddenly stands up again, hoping he could break the discomfort of the silence by moving. He starts to take the laundry down from its place above the stove as Farlan starts making a fire. Neither one of them speaks until the warmth of the flames has lulled Isabel into a deep sleep; Farlan covers her over with a quilt before joining Levi at the table, peeling his two treasured carrots and asking, “So what took you so long?” in a hushed voice.

Levi breathes out slowly before replying, “Nothing really. You shouldn’t worry about it.”

He can hear Farlan’s irritation in the short silence that follows. “Don’t give me that,” he huffs. “I do worry, and Isabel worries. I know you don’t feel like you’re accountable to us about anything that you do but we’re all in this together. You know I had to pretty near tie her down to keep her from coming to look for you.”

Levi sighs at the feeling of guilt that follows those words, and leans on the table, lowering his voice. “I got checked by the Gestapo today,” he explains briefly, looking up at Farlan’s worried face and hurrying to add, “It’s fine, I showed them the old papers. They won’t come looking for me here.”

Farlan seems to relax a little as he walks over to the pot of peas to stir them. “Did they question you? Is that why you took so long?”

Levi shakes his head. “They were getting suspicious so I ran. I had to hide for a long time.”

The other man nods slowly. “You’re not injured, are you?” Farlan asks, looking him over, and Levi shakes his head again.

“It’s a good thing they’ve all got terrible aim,” he replies with a hint of a grin that goes unanswered. Levi wonders whether he should tell Farlan about his hiding place, but thinks better of it and leaves the explanations at that.

It’s true he’s not injured, but his body feels heavy and aching, like the will that keeps him fighting has been drained out; his muscles feel weak and washed-out but he’s too tired to feel bitter about that now, to mourn all that lost potential. In the wake of his exhaustion comes that yearning for warmth that has nothing to do with the chilly spring weather, that need for closeness and comfort – and Farlan, he did ask that question, he does care what happens to Levi, and in comparison to that does any of the rest of it really matter, that Farlan still loves someone else, that Levi isn’t in love with him either?

He stands up from the table, walks over to the other man and wraps his arms lightly around his waist, leaning his head against his shoulder; he can feel Farlan growing tense before relaxing under his touch.

“The soup looks good,” he comments, and the other lets out a snort of laughter.

“We have no salt or meat to put in it,” he says and laughs breathily. “We don’t even have half an onion.”

Levi yawns widely. “I never liked onions much,” he mutters, rubbing his face against Farlan’s neck; he smells like soap and sweat in a way that Levi’s begun to associate with home. “Do you think we should wake her up once it’s done?”

Farlan shakes his head. “No, let her sleep,” he replies, scraping the wooden spoon against the bottom of the pot. “She can eat in the morning.”

Levi breathes in that soapy scent and before he knows it, he’s muttered, “I’m sorry I was late,” against the soft hairs at the back of the man’s head.

Farlan shrugs against his chin. “It wasn’t your fault,” he says, pressing his cheek against Levi’s forehead for a moment. “You’re here now. That’s what’s important.”

The soup cooks slowly and by the time it’s done, they’re both yawning widely; Levi washes himself by the sink, cleans his shirt and hangs it above the stove to dry while Farlan eats his dinner. When they finally crawl to bed, Levi feels Farlan shifting closer to him under the covers, and presses his body back toward him, sharing in the warmth. He pulls one of Farlan’s arms around himself before drawing his knees up closer to his chest.

“Will you be going tomorrow?” Farlan asks in a sleepy whisper, and Levi cringes at the thought that he’s managed to keep at bay until now.

“I’ll be back before you wake up,” he promises and they both fall silent; there’s nothing more to say, nothing that needs to be said, nothing they don’t both already know or feel.

As he’s drifting off, Levi’s thoughts go back to that apartment, replaying his useless knife attack vividly in his mind until he falls asleep, waking up late the next morning to the sound of someone trying to move quietly around the kitchen, his mind enveloped in that low level

annoyance that always lets him know which day of the week it is. He gets up quickly and leaves the apartment before noon, not wanting to take any of that hate out on Farlan and Isabel. Neither of them asks him where he's going when he leaves but he can feel their eyes on his back as he closes the door.

He walks around aimlessly, not stopping though he knows he'll have hours to go; he can't seem to keep still on these days. He barely takes notice of the flags and festivities until he gets caught in a throng of people watching the parade as it marches by, the red, white and black of the flags blaring out from amidst the green mass of uniforms. Levi watches the soldiers, feeling his muscles growing rigid with anger as he pushes his way through the crowd and keeps walking away from the city, not keeping track of his feet until he sees a familiar gap between two buildings, the bullet holes glaring at him from the wall across the street. Levi keeps from glancing at the window ahead and changes direction, walking until he gets hungry and his feet get tired and he nearly grows numb to that bitterness that seems to have become a part of him – has become impenetrable.

The evening comes early and the parades end, leaving gaggles of soldiers with nothing better to do than get drunk and wander around the city as aimlessly as Levi is; they don't pay him any mind, not when they're off duty and they're busy looking for someone else, preferably in an unseasonably short skirt with a smear of red lipstick on her mouth and a dire need for money. He takes his usual place on a park bench just as the bells of the Frauenkirche strike eight.

He watches the housekeeper as she leaves with her greying hair gathered under a scarf, waiting a good half an hour to make sure she's not coming back before making his way into the building and up the stairs. He knocks on the door softly and waits, a minute, two, three, but no one answers, and he doesn't know whether he should feel angry or relieved. He looks around himself in the empty hallway before exiting the building again and returning to the park, walking around it nursing his irritation, wallowing in that resentment that he carries within himself everywhere these days but which he just can't seem to outrun.

He waits for an hour and tries again, but there is no answer until after midnight when Krieger has finally returned, reeking of alcohol and cigarette smoke that nearly makes Levi gag when the door opens. As he finally slips into the apartment he can feel a chill settling into his bones and it almost takes over his anger, that distinctive coldness that has got nothing to do with the weather. After all, the evening has been warm and he's still wearing his winter coat, having pawned all his lighter jackets years ago. He hangs it in a wardrobe by the entrance and turns to Krieger, who's more drunk than he's realised, swaying a little back and forth even now, closing the door behind him.

"What the fuck took you so long?" he asks the man quietly. "I've been walking around the park for hours."

Krieger barely laughs, picking up a glass from the side table. "Didn't you know?" he asks, amused. "It's our Führer's birthday!" He raises the glass and his voice and Levi grits his teeth.

“Keep your fucking voice down,” he commands, not bothering to make a reply as he walks past Krieger. “Let’s get this over with,” he mutters as he crosses the apartment and enters the bedroom. He can hear Krieger emptying his glass and placing it back on the table before following him in.

“If you want to act like a whore that’s fine by me,” he says with a dry laugh as he reaches Levi, grabbing his neck and pulling him closer for a sloppy, wet kiss on his ear; Levi rubs at the spot as Krieger continues over to the gramophone and starts peering down at the machine like seeing it for the first time, changing the record and moving the needle back and forth with his unsteady hands for nearly a minute before giving up; the song starts in the middle of a familiar chorus. They undress, Levi much faster than the other man, who’s still struggling with the buckle of his belt by the time Levi has laid himself down on the lumpy mattress that smells musty, like old sweat and cigarettes; he crinkles his nose as he watches the man fighting the shiny leather boots off his feet, nearly falling down in the process. He feels like swearing again but keeps quiet, turning off the bedside lamp as soon as Krieger has managed to undress; without his clothes on he looks smaller and like usual Levi feels sickened by the sight of him. The sudden reminder that under every uniform is a human being leaves an acrid taste in his mouth, and he grits his teeth to keep the nausea at bay.

Krieger crawls under the blanket and shuffles closer; as soon as his clammy hand brushes against his back Levi spits out, “Did you get the papers yet?”

The hand withdraws and Krieger sighs heavily. “Why,” he starts, turning on his back and turning on the lamp on his side of the bed, “why must you always ask me that, Levi? Hm?” He reaches for the drawer of the nightstand and pulls out a cigarette case and a pack of matches. “It makes me feel like you don’t care about me.”

“I don’t,” Levi counters without thinking, “and it’s not as if you didn’t already know that. So when will the papers be done?”

Krieger sighs again and lights the cigarette, taking a long drag of it before saying, “Soon” and nothing else besides. Levi can’t help feeling deflated and somewhere deep down he knows he should’ve stopped wishing for a different answer long ago.

“Just remember,” he reminds the man nonetheless, “mine can wait. You get—”

“Your little friends’ lives are so much more important than your own. Yes, yes,” Krieger interrupts him, sounding angry. “What is it with that? Hm?” He breathes out a cloud of smoke. “Feeling guilty about something? Is trying to save those two your penance? Or do Jews not have that concept?”

Levi grits his teeth in irritation; he wants to say something, wants to point out he doesn’t expect someone like Krieger to understand, doesn’t expect anyone who’d celebrate the birthday of the embodiment of pure evil to give a shit about other people, let alone figure someone else’s life might be more important than theirs.

“Come to think of it, maybe this is my penance,” Krieger slurs and laughs a little. “What do you think? Is saving your miserable life going to make up for the things I’ve done? Or is it going to be more like seeing a rat and not killing it?”

Levi can feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing up, out of disgust or anger isn't clear to him. "It won't make a bit of difference to your life either way," he replies; the calmness of his tone surprises even him. "Most likely it's people like you who'll end up living comfortably until you're old and pissing your pants no matter what you do."

Krieger laughs more loudly. "You're probably right about that," he agrees, putting out the cigarette and turning to Levi; his hand closes around Levi's arm indelicately and he pulls him closer. "And I'll always have the memory of you to keep me company as well." The hand lets go and moves down and between his legs and Levi bites his teeth together hard not to make a sound. "Maybe this isn't my penance. Maybe you're my reward. Maybe if we gave every good officer a nice Jewish boy like you, we would've won the war already."

Levi grits his teeth, though he's not about to dignify what the man's said with a reply; Krieger calling him a boy is by far not the worst part of this, inaccurate as it is. "Can you skip that fucking rambling for once?" Levi asks instead, still facing the wall, his breath hitching as Krieger's grip around him tightens. "I've told you before that thinking isn't one of your strengths so why don't you stop trying and just get on with it? If you can even get it up in your state."

Krieger's chuckle is low in his ear. "Why don't you give me a hand with that?" he requests in a breathy whisper. "Be good to me, Levi. For once, like you mean it." There's that hint of desperation in Krieger's voice when he calls him by his name that Levi has come to find the most revolting thing about this. Krieger's hand moves faster now, but with those words its efforts have become all but meaningless. "What more do you want from me? Hm? I'm going to save your life, Levi, yours and your friends'. Don't I deserve anything for that? Any affection, anything at all?"

Levi wants to say no, but stays decidedly quiet, knowing there's no point in dragging this out. After all, he already knows what's coming next.

The hand lets go and pulls back; Levi can hear the quick, shallow breaths Krieger is drawing behind him. "You're just a cold little son of a whore, aren't you?" he hisses, the softness of just moments ago turned suddenly into poison. "Like mother like son, isn't that what they say?" He stops to wait for a reply but continues when he realises he won't get one. "You're a cold little bitch. I should've put a bullet in you when I first saw you and realised who you are. Even sweeping my floors you looked like you wanted to spit on me, you fucking frigid little slut."

"I think there's a contradiction there," Levi points out carelessly, making Krieger grab a handful of his hair and force his face hard against a pillow; the hold is painful and Levi's hands form fists around the sheets.

"You think this is funny?" he growls in his ear. "I literally hold your life in my fucking hands and you disrespect me? How smart a move do you think that is? Hm?"

Levi's muscles tighten at this; it seems drinking has made Krieger more volatile than usual and though Levi knows he's not likely to do anything hasty, he thinks it's better strategy to keep from adding insult to injury. So he stays quiet, breathing in the stale air he manages to catch and lets the man find his way back to repeating himself.

“You’ve worn yourself out, haven’t you?” he demands quietly. “It’s not me that’s the problem. You’ve let someone else fuck you, haven’t you?”

“No.” It’s the only question Levi answers these days. He’s said that word so many times and it’s grown so empty of feeling that he’s surprised when an image flashes through his mind, an image of an open window and a freshly shaven face.

Krieger’s pull on his hair tightens and Levi draws a hasty breath at the piercing pain. “Don’t lie to me you little cunt. Who was it? That friend of yours, is that it? You’ve let him fuck you, haven’t you? Him and every other man in this fucking city. Haven’t you?”

“No.” The grip tightens even further, leaving Levi gasping for breath.

“I told you not to lie to me,” Krieger snaps, raising his voice. “You know what’s going to happen if I find out you’ve been lying to me, don’t you?” The pause between the words is full of Levi’s broken gasps and the silent, lingering threat that he’s grown so accustomed to. “You’ll be on the first train east, Levi. I swear it. You do not want to test me on that.” The hold on his hair eases, becomes soothing, a different kind of unpleasant. “Levi,” Krieger suddenly coos into his ear softly again, like the previous words never happened and Levi shudders at the way his name sounds, so foreign though he must have heard it like this a hundred times by now. “Levi, I’m sorry for what I said. But you know I don’t like it when you judge me. You know what it does to me, don’t you?” The gentle touch moves on his back and still Levi says nothing. “You know I have no choice in this. I wasn’t always like this, you know that. Do you remember? Those days in Berlin?”

Something in Levi seems to die with these words. He doesn’t want to remember. Not Berlin, not any of it.

“You know I wanted you even then,” Krieger continues, brushing his fingers along Levi’s spine, making him shiver despite himself. “I could see it in your eyes. You knew how much I wanted you. You were toying with me even then.” He shifts his body on the bed and presses his face into the nape of Levi’s neck, breathing in and placing a few tentative kisses on the sensitive skin. “I can’t bear to think of you with anyone else. This means too much to me now.”

Levi reads the shifts of the man’s weight on the mattress; he knows to expect the sudden oily wetness, the rough hands pulling his body up and guiding his movements, the initial feeling of intrusion that deepens as the man on top of him grows harder from the tightness of him, the submission and self-preservation he falsely reads as devotion. Levi groans at the unpleasantness, the stench of alcohol in the man’s breath, the throbbing pressure that makes him wonder whether there truly ever was a time when he enjoyed this. Krieger’s hand comes back to his neck, squeezing like pliers as he leans into Levi, his lips coming down to his skin, his words coming close to his ear, “I love you, Levi.”

His body grows heavy with a new kind of dread, his throat seems to close from the surge of nausea that makes his body shiver violently as the man leans in again, repeating those words, his voice turning into a panting growl. In the end the words fall in time with the thrusts of his hips that rock Levi back and forth, making him grit his teeth to keep down the revulsion building in his body. After Krieger has finally finished, he swears loudly.

“God, look at you,” he says, a hint of fresh disgust overshadowing the usual victory. “You’ve soiled the sheets again. Don’t you Jews know how to keep yourselves clean?”

Levi gets up without saying a word, gathering the sheets as he leaves the room. The record has played its last and beyond the rattling of the needle Levi can hear a drunken choir of soldiers singing outside on the street: *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*. He walks into the bathroom and pulls out a bucket from under the sink, filling it with hot water before dropping in the sheets. He uses the toilet – an unpleasant experience – and, grabbing a stained rag of a towel from the top shelf of the cupboard, fills an enamel washbowl with hot water, grabs a bar of soap and steps into the tub. He’s still scrubbing himself when Krieger walks into the room ten minutes later; Levi keeps his eyes on himself not to see the mess he’s made on the man and not to have to wonder what kind of a person can wait ten minutes before washing someone else’s shit off themselves. The man whistles along with the national anthem as he cleans himself in the sink before taking a piss; he sits down on the toilet to watch Levi, who tries to ignore him as he rubs at his body with the towel until his skin turns pink from the roughness of the cloth and the force of his hands.

“Trying to wash the Jew off you?” Krieger asks amusedly, clearly not remembering he’s told that joke before. Levi doesn’t look up from the tub, doesn’t make a sound, doesn’t think about that comment for a second. “You know I’ve heard people say that you Jews are good with black magic,” the man goes on unencouraged. “I used to think the people who said that were insane but just look at you – you’re barely even a man and you’ve driven me crazy.” He stops for a moment, to self-reflect or to wait for an answer Levi doesn’t care. “You drive me crazy, Levi. What we do is crazy. It’s dangerous and it makes no sense for me to be doing things like this, but I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Levi cleans the towel angrily before emptying the enamel bowl into the tub and refilling it with more hot water; he says nothing to Krieger, who sighs heavily.

“I miss you when you’re gone,” he reassures him again for the thousandth time. “I really do. I never look at anyone else, men, women, it doesn’t matter. I only want you, Levi.”

Levi rinses the soap off his body as he fights the urge to smash the man’s face in with the washbowl.

“See, that’s why I’ve started to wonder – about the black magic, I mean,” Krieger slurs on. “My brain doesn’t feel right these days. I feel like...” He scratches his head distractedly for a moment. “I feel like you’re on my mind, all the time. I keep thinking about your body, how it feels to fuck you and I can’t stop, I really can’t.”

“You’re a fucking idiot,” Levi mutters as he empties the bowl again and steps out of the tub. “Fucking black magic? You’ve got to be joking.” He walks out of the bathroom, dripping water on the wooden floors as he changes the sheets. Krieger sits sullenly on the toilet for a few minutes before going to bed, his back turned to Levi in a petulant gesture that could never elicit a response. Levi lies down as far away from him as he can, managing to doze off for a few hours before suddenly waking up to some lingering thought, something he’s pushed aside but not forgotten that has fought its way toward the surface. He sits up slowly, feeling the soreness of Krieger’s doing as an unpleasant throb; he doesn’t give the snoring figure so much as a glance as he gets out of bed, dresses himself quietly, and leaves the apartment.

He walks through the park in the pre-dawn darkness; the city has fallen quiet and surrounded by the steady shuffle of his feet on the cobbled stones Levi lets that thought pierce through. The memory of that low voice comes to him vividly, saying something about his survival instinct. *I've not seen one as strong as yours in someone like you before* – was that it? All things considered what a fucking hideous thing to say. And there was that thing about what sort of food he could eat. So he knew, and still...

Levi makes his way to that part of town, not knowing or caring why. There's nothing to achieve in anything these days – what difference does it make if he chooses not to be careful this once? *Stick to the busier streets. Sidestep direct blows aimed at you. All the best.* Levi stops and looks up at the window. Even at this early hour it's open, there's a light on in the bedroom, the curtain is moving back and forth in the breeze. Levi frowns to himself as he turns away, toward home, thinking about the floors. It's been almost a month since he scrubbed them. Maybe today is the day for that.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- rape-scene
- foul language

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I gave myself a deadline for the 18th of September but look at me, being all excited and posting this so much ahead of time. The next deadline falls on the 25th of September.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

After the weekend Levi finally finds work clearing and cleaning the warehouse of a manufacturer of pesticides named Uhlmann who needs to expand his business after getting a contract with the army – a kind and humble man who says he doesn't mind hiring an honest, hard-working German who has fallen on hard times. The storage room hasn't been used in years and the man has gotten into the bad habit of dumping all of his excess belongings in it so Levi has his work cut out for him, but he doesn't mind. Sorting through someone else's mess suits him fine for a change, and after the old souvenirs and trinkets, books and battered furniture and other useless crap have been cleared out he doesn't mind the sweeping, the scrubbing and the dusting either.

The man pays him fairly enough, sometimes even slipping him some black market goods to take home to his “poor little sister – you know, the one with pneumonia”, some canned soup and beans, fresh eggs and butter. The first times when Levi objects the man reminds him that he's only doing his Christian duty, giving to those in need, and Levi feels a hint of guilt for accepting any of it after telling a lie like that. Nevertheless, he prefers the food to the money – seeing Isabel and Farlan's faces when he pulls them out of his bag at the end of the day is priceless to him.

After his last day of work Levi makes his way home, walking along the Elbe; the river is calm, reflecting the cool blue of the evening sky. The air smells of spring and Levi breathes deep as he throws his dark grey winter coat off himself, tucking it under his arm as he slows down his pace. He's carrying a heavy paper bag full with a bottle of milk, half a dozen eggs, a whole loaf of bread and a small lump of butter. Uhlmann said he regretted not being able to keep Levi on for longer, and truth be told he shares the sentiment; having something to do, even hard manual labour, has felt good after being cooped up for so long without anything occupying his mind.

There's an ease to his breathing now as he strides along the riverbank, the weather is warm and swallows chase each other over the water, their high-pitched chirps bouncing off the

surface. Though the walk home is long, Levi doesn't hurry, enjoying the freshness of the air after spending the whole day in the stuffy warehouse. When he finally sees the faint light in his bedroom window, Levi feels better about climbing the stairs up to the third floor and his apartment than he has in weeks. In his mind the rooms have grown bigger and less cluttered and his keenness for keeping them tidy has returned with his improving mood. Closing the door behind himself he can hear Isabel and Farlan talking in the kitchen; they both look pleased to see him.

"Hey, big brother!" Isabel exclaims from her seat, a rickety wooden chair drawn close to Farlan, who's holding a book in his hands. "Farlan is teaching me French!"

Levi smiles, lifting the paper bag on the table. "That's great," he comments, placing the food out in front of them unceremoniously, watching their mouths open to wide grins. "What do you think we should do with it?" he asks them as Isabel grabs the lump of butter, holding it like a holy relic.

"We could give half of the milk to Frau Gernhardt and the children," she is the first to suggest, "and we could make scrambled eggs from another little bit."

"Do you suppose we ought to eat all of it today?" Farlan sounds cautious. "It might be another while before we get more."

Levi shakes his head. "None of it will keep very long, so we might as well eat it quickly," he reminds them. "We can ration the bread and eggs over a couple of days but there's no point risking them going bad, especially since we're all hungry now."

Isabel laughs and jumps up from her seat. "Can I take the milk downstairs?" she asks eagerly, running out of the room before either of them has time to say anything.

Levi stretches his arms above his head and yawns as Farlan starts setting a fire in the stove using small pieces of wood and a few strips of an old newspaper. "I didn't know you speak French," he comments and the other man smiles warmly.

"I don't really," he explains, smearing soot on his forehead as he pushes a stubborn strand of hair off his face. "I used to study it at school, though. Now it's just... something to do, I suppose."

Levi nods. "Let's hope that will prove useful soon," he says and tonight, as the dry pieces of wood in the stove catch fire and warm up the small, cosy kitchen, he can almost believe it.

Farlan looks up at him, walks around the table and brushes a hand through Levi's hair affectionately. "I'll keep practising," he replies with another smile.

Levi reaches up to the collar of his shirt and pulls him down. "You've got soot on your face," he mutters, reaching in his pocket for a handkerchief and rubbing at the stain until Farlan groans with discomfort.

"What is it with you and that?" he asks, laughing as he returns to poke at the flames. "Did you fall in a sewer as a child or something?"

Levi shakes his head, getting up to find a bowl for the eggs. “No,” he tells the other man. “I just like things clean, that’s all. Dirt spreads disease, you know.”

Farlan seems to consider this for a moment before quietly agreeing and lifting a heavy cast-iron skillet on the stove top. Levi cracks half of the eggs in the ceramic bowl, finishing the scramble when Isabel returns from downstairs with a little less than half of the milk. For the rest of the evening the apartment is full of the glorious smell of fried butter and bread, which Farlan heats up on the pan until it’s golden and crunchy on the outside and warm and fragrant on the inside. They all eat until the food is heavy in their bellies and even Isabel proclaims that she couldn’t possibly eat another mouthful, though Levi wonders whether she’s just pretending to make him feel better – after all, they only had two thin slices each.

She jumps over to her bed behind Levi, curling up under a blanket though the room is nice and warm, and asks them what they will do after the war, her expression full of that earnest enthusiasm.

“I think I’d like to work on a farm somewhere,” she tells them instantly, her eyes bright. “Think about all that open space and fresh air! And I could have dogs and horses and cows and sheep.” She sighs happily. “Next summer I’ll start asking around. I’ll keep dressing like a boy if I have to, I know someone will give me work. We’ll need a lot of food when all those soldiers come back from the war.”

Levi and Farlan share that look that they seem to have reserved for these situations, and even from that one glance Levi knows they’ve agreed to humour her again. He considers the question half-heartedly, not having thought that far in years, to the end of the war. Perhaps he’s not wanted to debate whether he’s going to make it that far or perhaps all the things that could possibly be accomplished through the war seem equally unappealing to him. He stops to think about the last thing the girl said, but thinks it better not to correct her; somehow Levi knows Isabel is far more aware of the real state of things than she’s willing to admit.

Farlan smiles at her encouragingly, with Levi in letting Isabel keep her dreams, and says, “That sounds really nice.”

“Would you like to live on a farm?” Isabel asks him and Farlan laughs as he clears the dishes into the sink.

“Not in a million years,” he cries out. “Me, I’m going to find a nice place in a city somewhere, in a nice neighbourhood. Maybe with two bedrooms, so I can make the other one a study where I can write. I’ll go back to university to finish my degree and find work, and whenever I have enough money I’ll travel and write books about my adventures.”

“Do you think you’ll go back to Berlin then?” Levi asks him, and the smile on Farlan’s face falters for a second.

“Maybe,” he replies undecidedly, shrugging. “What about you?”

Levi considers the question in silence; the thought of Berlin is bittersweet, it’s home on one hand and misery on the other, squalid rooms, his mother dying, Kenny slowly losing his mind before they finally took him away on Kristallnacht. Even on a day like this he can’t imagine

the rest of his life and so he says, “I don’t know. I haven’t really thought about it.” Isabel and Farlan seem to understand and leave the questions at that.

He’s still thinking about it when he joins Farlan in the bedroom after doing the dishes and they talk about it in hushed voices, about Berlin, but neither will talk about the things that hurt the most, not on a night as good as this. They fall asleep with their bodies turned towards each other, enveloped in that intimacy that, despite how cold and hard the world has grown, or perhaps precisely because of that, has become so familiar and comfortable.

Levi wakes up suddenly to the sound of a rumbling engine and the painful squeeze of Farlan’s hands around his arm. The room is dark and disorientating and Levi wonders hazily what time it is until Farlan catches his attention again. He’s whispering his name, hastily, needily, repeating it over and over until it turns into a plea, only falling silent when he hears the banging of car doors from down in the street in front of the building. Levi looks over at him and though the room is dark he can tell all the colour has drained from the other man’s face; he’s staring at Levi, his breathing quick and shallow, his eyes wide with terror even as Levi takes his hand and tears it off his forearm silently.

Out on the street men are talking, too quietly for Levi to make out what they’re saying. He’s still holding Farlan’s hand, the sweat of his palm wetting his fingers, and he’s shushing him as he starts to mutter a prayer under his breath, like a childhood memory evoked by fear. Some part of Levi’s mind finds it strange, inappropriate even, but he knows not to get into it.

“Quiet now,” he whispers absently as Isabel sneaks into the room. “Keep away from the windows,” he tells her, and she crawls into the bed, craning her neck to try and see what’s happening. Levi hears another car arrive in the street; he has Isabel take Farlan’s hand, whose prayers are now coming out in Latin, while he crosses the room to the window, peering outside through a gap between the wall and the curtain, his heart beating wildly in his chest. He can see two cars with people in uniform standing beside them, but in the dim light it’s hard to make out the colour of their clothes.

“What’s happening out there?” Isabel asks from the bed with an impatient edge to her voice; she has thrown her arm around Farlan, who is slowly rocking back and forth between recitations of the Ave Maria and the Pater Noster; the tips of his fingers are rubbing together gently as he prays.

“They’re just standing there and talking,” Levi tells her calmly, leaving out the fact they’re pulling guns out of the cars as he counts the glowing tips of their cigarettes. One of them glances up at the bedroom window, or so Levi thinks at first, but the eyes move forward to sweep across the rest of the buildings lazily, like he’s merely taking in the architecture. Levi can feel his muscles relaxing for an instant until the soldiers start dropping their cigarettes one by one and stomping on them with the heels of their boots, making the little sparks of light disappear. They take their guns in hand and start walking towards the building.

Levi swears under his breath, but not quietly enough for Farlan not to hear it. The man starts gasping for air like he’s already been shot, Isabel rushes in to clamp her hand over his mouth and wrap one arm tightly across his chest to keep him still. He struggles, tears streaming

down his face as Levi rushes to the bed, shushing him as the door downstairs closes with an audible bang.

“You need to shut up and hide,” he tells Farlan in a quiet command. “Both of you.”

Isabel has already left the room by the time Levi has coaxed Farlan out of the bed; his legs seem barely able to carry his weight as he follows Levi toward the sitting room one shaky step at a time, drooling into the hand he’s cupped over his mouth as he mutters words like “can’t” and “no” and “die”. Levi can hear footsteps on the stairs and he knows they don’t have a lot of time, so he grabs Farlan’s arm and yanks him toward the door, guiding him more forcefully. He stumbles and whines; beyond it Levi hears a man’s voice as he speaks out in the stairwell and suddenly the soldiers stop their climb. There’s a moment of confusion muffled by the echoes in the hallway, Levi clamps his hand over Farlan’s mouth as he strains to hear what’s happening. Then, slowly, the footsteps start to recede, out of the building and back into the street.

Levi whistles Isabel into the room as Farlan sinks onto their bed, clutching his chest, his face etched with distress as he crosses his hands so tightly the tips of his fingers turn white. Levi crosses the room to the window, watching as the soldiers emerge onto the street and make their way across it to the building on the opposite side.

“They got the wrong house,” Levi whispers, only now realising the tension in his muscles. “They fucking got the wrong house.”

Farlan falls back on the bed, a sobbing, heaving mess that Isabel pulls clumsily onto her lap; she’s running her fingers through his hair and humming quietly as violent shouts erupt from outside, screams and roars of “*Out!*” and “*Quick!*”, slamming of doors and the rumble of footsteps running up and down the stairs. Levi watches as the soldiers drive five people out onto the street, Herr and Frau Ehrmann - the old couple who live in the building across the street – and three others, a woman and two men, the younger of whom looks close to Levi’s age. The soldiers are ushering them toward the back of the army car, guns still in hand.

“Turn on the light,” Levi suddenly tells Isabel, who reaches for the switch, ignoring Farlan violently shaking his head and pleading. Other windows on the street are starting to light up; the racket has woken the neighbours, and Levi can see others looking onto the scene, not objecting, not running out, just watching, following. The people are climbing into the car now, wailing and crying, when a shape suddenly breaks out from the rest, tearing down the street – the younger man.

There’s a loud, resolute, terminal explosion as a gun goes off and the man falls down mid-step, landing on his face on the cobbled street, pulsing out a pool of blood where he lies though his arms are still moving as he tries to push himself up. His mother, the last of the people to climb onto the car, lets out a screeching cry, falling to her knees before two soldiers grab her by the arms and shove her in with the rest. Another two soldiers have walked over to the man and grabbed him by the ankles, dragging him face-down along the street; Levi can hear his muffled screams of pain as his hands claw for a hold on the stones. The soldiers throw him in the back of the van and drive off, leaving the wide dark smear of blood as the only evidence they were ever there.

Levi looks back at Farlan and Isabel, who look immobile and pale like statues on the bed; Isabel's fingers have gotten tangled in Farlan's hair and though it seems painful he doesn't seem to notice, staring ahead of himself blankly, tears still falling from his eyes. Levi walks over to them, climbing behind Isabel and wrapping his arm around her shoulder; she flinches at the touch, but doesn't make a sound. He feels like he should say something, to make them feel better if nothing else, some platitude about how everything's going to be alright, but he can't bring himself to get the words out as an image of the young man fills his mind.

"Don't worry," Isabel whispers, like reading Levi's thoughts. "It will all be over soon." She has started stroking Farlan's hair again, soothingly, like Levi's seen her do with wounded animals. She starts humming again, a song that sounds like a lullaby to Levi; it's calming, just like her words, morbid as they were. They all stay like this, for how long Levi isn't sure, but eventually Isabel turns the lights off again and they shuffle under the covers, dozing off to restless sleep huddled together like frightened children.

The next morning Levi wakes up early, slipping out of bed quietly not to disturb the others; he feels restless and tired, he's hardly slept four hours all night, waking up every half an hour to Isabel's tossing and turning or to Farlan sitting up in the bed suddenly, holding a hand to his chest and breathing heavily. Whenever he has done this Levi has remembered the resounding gunshot, the hesitation in the young man's step, the inevitability in his falling, and it has taken him a moment to allow his exhaustion to take over.

They both look to be resting peacefully now, so Levi leaves the room as soundlessly as he can, making a trip to the communal bathroom to empty his bladder and to fill a bucket with water. Grabbing a coarse, wooden brush from a cupboard under the sink he heads outside, kneeling down on the street to scrub at the blood, which has congealed into little pools between the cobbled stones. He works for hours without thinking about it further as the sun slowly climbs higher in the sky, stopping to look up only when a pair of old, tattered shoes come into his field of vision.

Their owner is one of his neighbours, Böhmer, a man in his mid-fifties from across the street whom Levi has never particularly liked, though he doesn't know what exactly it is about him. He stands in front of Levi, casting a shadow over the smear of blood, his hands in his pockets, glancing up at the sky quickly before turning back to Levi and smiling.

"Just thought I'd come over and thank you," he says, nodding toward the blood. "About this, I mean. None of us need to see that first thing in the morning."

Levi clicks his tongue before muttering, "I'm not doing it for you" and going back to his work.

Böhmer seems a touch taken aback by this but clears his throat and continues, "Though don't you think that's more of a woman's job? Cleaning the street?" he asks him now, laughing a little, perhaps expecting Levi to find it funny, like he's not really thought about that before.

Levi's hand clutches the brush almost painfully as he presses it harder against the street not to throw it at the man's face.

“It’s not like the mess will give a fuck whether I’m a man or a woman,” he replies, not making much of an effort to hide his irritation. “It’ll get clean just the same.”

The weight on Böhmer’s feet shifts in a way that tells Levi he’s not happy with how he’s being spoken to. Frau Gernhardt told Farlan and him when they moved into the building that Böhmer has lived in that same apartment all his life, taking over the lease after his mother died almost ten years ago; apparently the two had never spent a day apart and, having met Böhmer for the first time the previous day, Levi thought then that it explained a lot about his behaviour; even when he seemed to be in a good mood, he was impossibly impatient and short-tempered with everyone in a way that made Levi’s skin crawl. Now as the man stands in front of him, practically tapping his foot against the drying cobbled stones, it takes a significant amount of self-control not to sink his head into the bucketful of filthy water.

“They were Jews, you know,” Böhmer tells him without him asking, and Levi feels a shiver running across his arms. “I mean, no one told me but I’m sure they were. I could hear them through my ceiling, walking around in there.” He stops to point upward with a finger. “They tried to be so quiet, but I kept count and I knew there were more people in that apartment than was supposed to be.” He smiles to himself as Levi grits his teeth, scrubbing harder in a useless attempt at drowning out the man’s following words. “I’d wash my hands after you’re done if I were you. You don’t want that filth on you, do you?”

“Thanks for the advice,” Levi mutters, though keeping up appearances has never made him feel so wretched and angry. He stands up and looks at what’s left of the blood, a watered down mess of red that the next spring rain will finish clearing. When he pours the water from the bucket into the bathtub in the communal bathroom, he’s glad he can’t see the tint of red against the dirty, discoloured zinc coating, but the watered-down blood splashing against the white porcelain of the basin when he washes his hands makes him frown at the sight. He re-enters the apartment to find Isabel sitting alone at the kitchen table, nibbling on the end-piece of the loaf of bread left over from the day before. When Levi asks her where Farlan is, she nods wordlessly toward the bedroom, where the man is standing by the window, staring down onto the street at the wet cobbled stones, his features emotionless.

“What did Böhmer want?” he asks Levi in a hollow voice, not looking up at him.

“To say thank you for taking care of it,” Levi replies briefly; there’s no need for Farlan to know about the rest of it.

“That was nice of him,” Farlan mumbles absently. “How do you suppose they found them?”

Levi sighs and shrugs. “Who knows?” he replies, unable to think about anything further to say; instead he takes Farlan’s hand in his, pulling him gently toward the door. “Come on, we should get some breakfast.”

Farlan follows him reluctantly, tearing his eyes away from the window like for some inexplicable reason it’s the last thing he wants to do. They agree over breakfast that they should all keep doing what they normally do to avoid raising suspicion, but when Levi tells Farlan he ought to get out of the apartment more, the other man laughs dryly before unequivocally refusing.

“In that case we’ll just have to hope people believe all those hints I’ve been dropping about you being off your rocker,” Levi tells him irritably. “And since we’re hoping, let’s hope they don’t take those hints too seriously either.”

An ugly blush covers Farlan’s cheeks and he crosses his arms over his chest. “Well that’s fucking brilliant,” he huffs. “Suddenly I have to be crazy not to want to go out there?” He gestures toward the main street, and Levi shrugs.

“Your parents died. It was hard for you since you were a bit slow from the get-go – slow enough for no one to want to put a gun in your hand, but close enough to normal that you can be useful, mind. Now your brother has died too. That’s the story we’re going with and if you don’t like it then you can think of something else, though it’s going to sound really fucking strange at this point.”

Farlan looks at him defiantly for a moment before shaking his head angrily and turning back to his breakfast.

A tense silence fills the apartment after that, lingering for the whole weekend and making Levi restless and moody. He tries to avoid staying indoors for too long, but with nothing to do outside but walking around and hoping nervously he doesn’t run into the Gestapo again, there isn’t much reason to leave the safety of their home, as relative as it has grown in their minds since that night. Isabel still stays away for most of the day, visiting Herr Schild and bringing back old newspapers she picks up from the trash, tearing out every piece of news about U-Boats she can find and adding them to the collection she keeps in a shoebox under her bed.

Farlan stops reading and won’t teach Isabel French even when she asks him to, answering most questions by saying he’s tired; he lies in bed for most of the day, not sleeping, just staring at the wall ahead without saying a word, and Levi doesn’t know what to say to him to make him feel better. At night when they’re lying next to each other Levi tries to shuffle closer under the blankets and hold him, but Farlan moves quickly out of his reach and he doesn’t push it further. On Sunday they eat the last of the eggs and bread for breakfast, which leaves them with nothing but two boiled potatoes each for dinner and that night they all find it difficult to fall asleep from the hunger.

Levi leaves the apartment early the following day, nerves still shattered by the past weekend, and as he walks along the streets he can’t help but be more wary, scanning the crowds as he passes them and slipping onto quieter alleys at the first hint of grey ahead. He fetches their ration stamps for the week and starts wandering around the city, asking for work wherever he can think to, finally stopping at midday to rest in a park by the river. His eyes follow the people around him lazily, the mothers out with their children, the elderly over their games of chess or cards and he wonders at how life can be like this, can carry on like this for so many people while others get shot in cold blood not five kilometres from where they live.

The scene replays in his head, and though it’s not the first time Levi’s seen a dead body, something about the man’s flailing arms as they dragged him down the street has burned into his brain and he can’t shake it, that thought: *he wasn’t much older than I am*. And who now would be left to know his name, let alone anything else, who he was, what he wanted from his life. For it all to disappear so quickly seems terrifying, most of all perhaps because Levi

knows that's how it would be with him. Should they all get caught there'd be no one left to remember Levi, just Theodore Mertz or Lukas Weller. Though if Krieger survived...

Levi cringes; the thought isn't pleasant, though the past few days have reminded him of why he sought Krieger out the way he did. That feeling of living like a rat, like vermin, trying to keep out of sight, feeling like every second of your life is borrowed time has never gone away and Levi feels it again now, that desperate, anxious need to get out of this place gnawing at his chest, that instinct for survival that brought him to Dresden, that brought him to Krieger, had him climb that garden wall and follow that terrible plan.

He pushes himself onto his feet, knowing full well where they'll take him now, and though the way is long he doesn't mind. He follows the same route as before, even squeezes through that gap between the buildings, looking around himself and spotting that open window before running down the alley and bouncing off the cart, pulling himself up on top of the wall. A few leaps that feel longer now without the adrenaline pounding in his ears and he pushes into the bedroom, dropping on the floor much more quietly than last time.

He sits still and stops to listen for signs of someone else being there, of someone having noticed him, but the apartment remains silent so he stands up slowly and walks into the sitting room. There's that ascetic simplicity, that feel of space and that fresh smell of wood in the air; Levi breathes deeply, feeling like it's the first time in days that he's really breathed at all.

He crosses the room, keeping his steps light as he sneaks into the small kitchen, feeling alert but not afraid as he looks over the room. It proves to be as meticulously arranged as the other ones, but just like them it proves to be lacking in cleanliness upon closer examination of the oven, the shelves, the little porcelain tiles above the stove. Without thinking about it Levi starts opening cupboards, looking for cleaning supplies, finally finding them in a haphazard arrangement in the corner of the half-empty pantry, a few pathetic rags and all of five buckets, a brush and a bar of soap in an enamel container. He grabs a few of the rags and starts cleaning, wiping the grime and dust off wherever he can see any.

Going through the rest of the cabinets it strikes Levi as odd how impersonal they are; there are no strange trinkets, no heirloom coffee jars or candelabras, no mismatching, odd-numbered tea sets or souvenir plates from Paris or even from the man's home in Austria. It reminds Levi of his home back in Berlin with his uncle Kenny; though everything they had was mismatched and second-hand, nothing had any significance, if you broke something you didn't think about it twice, there was none of that ridiculous sentimentality that people attach to the things they own, and as Levi looks through the man's kitchenware he thinks he could probably smash every last piece of it and the man wouldn't blink an eye over any of it. There's also that lack of a woman's touch that reminds Levi equally of Berlin – Kenny was never much of a ladies' man, after all, not in a way that would've coaxed any woman into living with them for long enough to leave an impression.

He grabs a jar of tea from the shelf along with a pot and a cup and starts boiling water on the gas stove top. While the water's heating up he returns to the pantry, finding very little of anything one would call dinner but clutching half a loaf of bread and a jar of something that proves to be apple jam, preparing himself two sandwiches which he carries into the sitting

room on a tray along with the tea, firmly silencing the part of himself that keeps wondering why he's doing any of it.

He sits down on the sofa on the same spot as last time, looking across the coffee table at the armchair as he eats, remembering the man's heavy frame, the casual clothing, his relaxed posture and it occurs to him now for the first time that he doesn't even know the man's name. There are no pictures on the walls or on the bookshelf, nothing personal in this room either unless it's locked in the drawers of that dark wooden secretaire. Levi takes his cup and walks over to the books to peer at the titles: old history books, guides to linguistics, two volumes on German literature and, unsurprisingly, *Mein Kampf*, placed between an old musty book in Latin and four volumes of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Levi feels a sudden nauseous dread as he forces down the rest of his tea and hurries over to the desk, pulling at the writing top though he knows it's locked. The two bottom-most drawers aren't, however, and he pulls them open one at a time, looking at the neat piles of paper. For a moment he's too afraid to touch anything, but then he lifts out a whole stack at once, flipping through it neatly not to place anything in disarray. Most of them don't make sense to him, the man has used some sort of shorthand he can't read, and the rest of the papers seem dull as dirt, endless lists of supplies with no additional information. There's a long essay about racial purity that makes Levi cringe, but in the midst of the papers Levi finds a torn letter – only a few lines of the ending are intact, and the last three of those have been drawn over – that reads:

for this long. I must admit it all seems meaningless to me now, for many of the reasons I have specified above. I know you share this sentiment and won't begrudge me for this decision or my not returning. My appreciation for your assistance remains unwavering, as ever.

I know you understand this loneliness better than most, and only you know how all this affects me. But I fear my opening up to you is not safe in our current situation, and writing it all in a letter is especially unthinkable. I'm sure you know after N that is a risk I cannot take, as is the case with the help you require, no matter how my morals may compel me.

All the best,

your Commander

Levi reads the lines over and over, this only evidence of the man's personality he has been able to find. It's not surprising it raises more questions than it answers, and Levi's mind is buzzing with them as he carefully places the stack of papers back in the drawer. He returns to the kitchen to fill a bucket with water, rolling up the rugs in the sitting room and getting down on his knees to wash the floor as he reminds himself of the letter's contents so he won't forget. What is it that seems meaningless to him, and for what reasons? Whom is the letter

addressed to? A friend? A colleague? Levi wouldn't think it'd be a love letter with that lack of emotion were it not signed "your Commander", which seems like an intimate touch.

"The Commander," he mutters to himself as he rubs at the dust and dirty footprints on the wooden planks, remembering suddenly the man's parting words as he left his apartment before: *All the best.*

Levi thinks of the way the last sentences have been drawn over, messily, angrily even, as if revealing this kind of emotion has upset their writer to the point of tearing up the letter. Did he write it again without those lines, or did he perhaps never send it after all? *I know you understand this loneliness better than most* – so he is lonely then, or was at the time when he wrote that letter. Who or what was N, and what sort of assistance was the intended recipient of the letter looking for that the man's morals would compel him to give?

Levi's thoughts are interrupted by the sound of footsteps climbing the stairs outside the apartment. He stops to listen, wishing for the sound of a door closing a few floors down, but when it never comes he swears quietly under his breath, dropping the wet rag and hurrying to the bedroom window, climbing out the same way he came in. He turns up the collar of his coat as he walks away and he doesn't look back even when he hears the sound of someone closing the window behind him.

In the gloomy atmosphere of the apartment the letter stays on Levi's mind for one evening and a day before Frau Gernhardt and her children pay an unexpected visit, taking his mind off it. While Isabel plays with the kids she tells Levi and Farlan in a hushed voice that Herr and Frau Ehrmann have been executed by guillotine in Münchner Platz for harbouring "undesirables" in their home, though she doesn't know whether they were Jews or not.

"Was it you who cleaned the street?" she asks Levi, who nods wordlessly. "That was very good of you. I would've hated for the children to see that."

"It was no problem," Levi tells her, keeping his words polite. "I like to clean things."

Her smile seems out of place in the situation, but it does something to ease that heaviness in Levi's mind. "Yes, I've come to understand you do," she says, sipping at her glass of water since that's all they had to offer.

Farlan scoffs. "He's always scrubbing something, isn't he?" He sounds bitter, so resentful all of a sudden that both Levi and Frau Gernhardt turn to look at him; there's a disdainful look on his face. "He keeps us all busy here, though who knows what for? I certainly don't." He leaves the table abruptly, nearly knocking over his chair as he exits the room with Frau Gernhardt and Levi watching him go.

"I'm sorry about that," Levi says, though Frau Gernhardt raises a hand and shakes her head. "He can be unpredictable at times. And he's not been feeling well lately. His brother—"

"Yes, I heard," she cuts in. "Please, there's no need to explain. What happened..." Her voice trails off as she looks toward the living room where Isabel is reading to Hanna and Bruno.

“Well, it would have upset anyone.”

That evening is the first when Farlan refuses to join Levi and Isabel for dinner and from there on as far as Levi can tell he doesn't eat, unless it's half a potato he grabs from the pantry when both Levi and Isabel are away. Whenever they're not, he keeps to the bedroom, lying in bed with the curtains drawn, still not sleeping but staring at the ceiling without speaking even to answer their questions and whenever Levi turns in he gets up, moving over to the tattered sofa in the sitting room. Day after day Levi goes looking for work in vain and comes back to the apartment to find Isabel sitting alone in the kitchen, looking across the table at Farlan's plate, which she's filled as far as she's been able with whatever food they have managed to get for the day.

After two weeks of this Levi feels useless and dejected, and when he goes out he doesn't bother asking for work, just wanders around aimlessly, waiting for the hours to pass so he can be a day closer to... what exactly? He doesn't know anymore. When Krieger calls for him by letter he doesn't care to get angry – he barely manages to feel glad for not shitting himself this time – but the worst part of it is that going home afterwards doesn't feel like a comfort and he can't bring himself to go there after all of that, those clammy hands all over him and Krieger's insults in his ear as he treats him like his property. His thoughts feel cloudy and unfocused until he sees that open window and he knows exactly what to do.

When he pulls himself through the window and into the room, he half expects to see that gun again, but instead he is faced with an empty room, the bed as tidily made as last time, that same musky scent of wood mixing with the cool night air. Wondering how someone could be so stupid as to leave their window open when they're not at home, Levi walks around the rooms, nearly on tiptoe, trying to keep his steps as soundless as he can, and wastes no time in rolling up the rugs on the sitting room floor. He can remember exactly where he left off, that knot in the wood on which he dropped the floorcloth last time has haunted his dreams and it's where he starts after fetching a bucket of water from the bathroom.

The man hasn't finished what he started, that much is clear to him as he wipes at the dust, the sand, the muddy footprints on the wide, painted floorboards. It feels good to watch the dirt come off and the murkier the water in the bucket gets, the better Levi feels, like he's draining all the shit from the past few weeks into it every time he squeezes the wet out of the rag. By the time he's done with the sitting room he feels like humming along to one of those songs his mother used to sing to him all those years ago, the ones he can barely remember now.

He changes the water and moves on to the bedroom, crawling halfway under the bed to reach the fist-sized balls of dust in the middle; it seems the man's military neatness doesn't extend to the spots he can't see. Levi crinkles his nose at the oversight and keeps working, scrubbing under the dresser, under the wardrobe, going through all the nooks and crannies meticulously. The dirty water splashes against the clean white porcelain as Levi empties the bucket into the bathtub and he thinks of what a shame it is, to tarnish such a beautiful thing with so much filth. He walks back to the kitchen, rummaging a while in the cupboards and returns with a brush and some soap, setting to scrubbing the bath eagerly, smiling to himself as he puts his weight behind it though there are no visible stains in the pure white surface.

The task captivates him completely and it takes him too long to register the sound of a slamming door and the loud, scuffling footsteps approaching the bedroom. Levi swears under his breath as he drops the brush in the bucket and jumps up, running to the window, but his hands have barely grabbed the sill when the door to the bedroom flies open.

Two men stumble in, a mess of long legs and arms pulling at each other, tearing at clothes and shoving each other toward the bed. Levi's hands grip the window ledge and he doesn't know what to do; the realisation that the men aren't caught in a fight to the death has petrified him, his eyes have widened to follow the scene, to watch the men's lips meet hastily as they struggle with the buttons on each other's shirts. It takes the Commander ten seconds to notice Levi, but as soon as he does he jumps back, and the other man sees him too. Levi continues to lean on the window, his heart hammering in his chest as they all stare at each other for a few seconds before the Commander walks over to his washstand and opens the small drawer, pulling out a towel.

"Who the fuck is this?" the other man asks him, pointing at Levi, sounding angry as the Commander crosses the room; Levi barely has time to catch the light bouncing off the razor before the Commander has struck, slicing the man's throat with one sure, vicious motion, keeping his gurgling scream in his palm as the man drowns slowly on his own blood, making Levi push closer to the window, his eyes wide with surprise. The Commander lets him fall on the floor, placing the towel under the cut that's pulsing out more blood than the fabric can take in; behind all the shock at seeing another dead body, at smelling that overpowering stench of fresh blood, Levi numbly thinks of the floor; it hasn't been fifteen minutes since he cleaned it.

Meanwhile the Commander has returned to the washstand and dropped the razor in the basin, washing his hands calmly, like he'd just finished shaving and not slitting someone's throat. He turns to Levi while he dries his hands, saying, "What are you doing here?", a simple question that Levi struggles to understand despite the eerie serenity with which it was delivered.

"I... I thought..." he starts, staring at the Commander in what must seem like abject horror. "You killed him," he manages roughly and in the back of his mind he can't stop thinking about the blood sinking into the wood and how difficult it will be to get it out.

The man's eyes are stern but his voice is soothing when he says, "Calm down and stay here. I'll be right back." He leaves the room, stepping over the dead body with one long stride before exiting the apartment.

Levi wastes no time in following him, walking around the corpse rather than stepping over it; he hurries into the bathroom, pulls two towels from the corner cupboard and replaces the one under the man's throat; the blood has seeped through, made it heavy and warm and Levi realises he'll never get it to the bathroom without it dripping everywhere. He grabs the enamel washbowl and sinks the towel in, turning the water as red as wine in a matter of seconds. *Like Moses*, he thinks to himself, almost laughing out loud at the thought of what Kenny would have said to that. He takes the second towel and wipes at the floor, knowing it will take a lot more than that to get it clean. He doesn't notice how badly his hands are shaking until he walks back to the window, looking out into the empty street. That man was

wearing a uniform, and Levi doesn't know whether that should make him glad or very, very scared.

"What the fuck have I gotten myself into?" he mutters to himself, trying to steady himself as a wave of agitation crashes over him. Behind him the door opens and the Commander walks in, looking over at Levi, looking at his hands, bloody all the way up over the wrists.

"What-?" he starts, but stops to glance down at the body at his feet, noticing the fresh towels. "You cleaned?" he asks instead and Levi nods shakily.

"I'm filthy," he replies, looking down at his hands.

The Commander hums and nods toward the bathroom. "Yes, you are. Come on. We'll need to draw some water for the chaps."

"Chaps?" Levi repeats stupidly, following the man into the bathroom. The man draws out two buckets of water as Levi washes his hands, forcing the soap under his fingernails until all the red has disappeared. Levi walks back into the sitting room taking a seat on the sofa to peer at the body by the bedroom door; the dead man's pose reminds him of Krieger sleeping when he's too drunk to take off his clothes, and there's something oddly pleasant about that thought. The Commander walks in carrying two full buckets and one empty one into which he drops the newly soaked towel from under the corpse's neck.

"Who was he?" Levi asks suddenly, though he wonders whether he actually cares.

"No one really," the Commander replies. "He'd seen you, so I had to kill him, that's all."

Levi's eyes widen at the explanation before he figures the man's probably not intended it as a compliment.

"Oh? I didn't realise I was someone that important," he says nonetheless, making the man chuckle.

"You're not," he assures Levi, who snorts quietly under his breath.

"And you are?" he demands from the man, who nods slowly.

"Yes, I am," he says, his voice low and pleasant and tinted with amusement. "In a way at least."

"What way is that?" Levi asks now, not sure whether he finds the man's composure in the situation reassuring or alarming.

The Commander stands up and walks over to an armchair, sitting down opposite of Levi; the solemnity has returned to his face. "What were you doing in my apartment?" he asks Levi in return, making him sneer quietly.

"I don't know," he answers truthfully, shrugging. "What were you doing with that man when you came in?"

The Commander's face grows even more serious, though he raises one of those bushy brows a fraction. "Is that what you came here for?" he asks and Levi rushes to shake his head.

"Not in a million fucking years," he blurts out without thinking, and the Commander huffs, sounding displeased.

"You cleaned my floors again," he comments; his gaze is piercing and Levi can't help looking away. "Why do you keep coming here? And why do that of all things?" He falls quiet, but Levi doesn't answer. "I'd expect you to at least take something. Other than food, that is," he adds, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lighting one, throwing one of his legs over the other.

"I like to clean," Levi replies sullenly without acknowledging the latter comment; since when does he look like a fucking thief?

"That's a very poor explanation," the Commander says, smoking his cigarette slowly; the light of it makes his face look older, more tired and worn than Levi's thought before. "Why don't you scrub your own floors if you have a mind to?"

Levi shrugs again. "Thought I'd give you a hand," he drawls, "since you're shit at housekeeping."

At first the man looks unimpressed but then he smiles; the expression is even stranger now than it has been before, what with the dead body lying in his bedroom. "Well, I wouldn't like you to think the gesture isn't appreciated," he says, shaking the ash from the cigarette onto a small ivory tray. "In fact, since you're clearly not without skill, I'd like to offer you a position."

Levi looks at the man suspiciously. "What kind of position?" he asks, wondering whether it'd be the type one could hardly say no to, having witnessed a cold-blooded murder in the home of a Nazi officer; the thought of balancing this man and Krieger makes him picture jumping off the Augustus Bridge as a solid option. His thoughts are interrupted by a soft knock coming from the front door.

"We'll get to that in a moment," the Commander promises him as he pushes himself up from the armchair to open the door.

Two men enter, the other wearing an SS uniform and the other, taller one in civilian clothing. The one in the uniform walks in briskly, glances at Levi and turns to the body, his face growing sour. As soon as the door is closed he turns to the Commander and opens his mouth to a flood of hushed, indignant words which don't make any sense to Levi. The man points at the body, seeming angry but not surprised, while the Commander's face has grown impassive. He answers in a low voice, there's something resonant about the softness of his speech and Levi's eyes jump from one to the other as he struggles to make sense of it all.

When he finally grasps that thought, his eyes widen and he stops to stare as the tall one crosses the room to the body, grabbing a strip of gauze and tying it around the man's neck with a few practised moves. The Commander addresses him next and he replies; he speaks

the same language, but it sounds different coming from him, and Levi realises they're not all from the same country. It leads him to the only possible conclusion.

"You're American?" he asks the tall man in a hushed grunt.

They all turn to look at him in a nerve-shattering silence for a while, until the man in the uniform asks something of the Commander, gesturing toward Levi angrily. The Commander smiles again, smoking the last of his cigarette before putting it out. "He's here to do the clean-up," he says in German, looking at Levi almost kindly. "Isn't that right?"

Levi takes a few seconds to understand, to catch up with the fluent switch of speech but when he does he nods. "Yeah, I'm here for the clean-up," he replies, nodding emphatically. "Actually, you should take off your shirt," he adds just as the Commander is turning away; he looks confused and Levi points at his arm. "There's blood on your sleeve," he explains and, after glancing quickly at the stain, the man's hands fly instantly to his buttons, finishing quickly what the dead man started.

"Ah, yes," he says; that hint of amusement has returned to his voice again. "Mustn't let the shirt get ruined."

The man in the uniform rolls his eyes while the American laughs quietly, making Levi feel like the only sane person in the room.

Levi walks over to the Commander, snatching the shirt from his hands and retreating to the bathroom, hesitating over whether to lock the door behind himself but leaving it open in the end – it doesn't seem like the best approach to have the men think he doesn't trust them, like he's not there for a reason. Levi starts running cold water over the shirt sleeve, rubbing at the red stain vigorously and though he knows he'll need to soak it, he'd rather pretend to wash it like this, to have a minute to think, a minute away from... whoever they are.

"Should've scrubbed my own fucking floors," Levi mutters to himself as he drops the shirt in the sink and looks up at his reflection, struggling to form a single coherent thought. The men in the living room are spies, have to be, there is no other explanation for it; though Levi can't speak or understand their language he has heard enough to tell the difference between English and Russian, and who the fuck else would want to come to Germany from abroad at a time like this?

He presses the cold palms of his hands on his eyes for a few seconds, breathing out slowly, surprised to find that underneath the shock he is still not afraid – that reassuring feeling he gets in the apartment lingers, as do the Commander's words. He's here to do the clean-up, that is his job, and who could do it better than he can, after all? Levi clings to that sense of purpose with everything he's got as he runs more cold water on the shirt; the stain is barely a pink smudge now, and he sighs in relief before leaving it to soak and returning to the sitting room.

The men are still talking about the body, it seems, keeping their voices so low Levi can barely hear them from across the room. He walks over, trying to appear as inconspicuous as possible as he kneels by the body and pushes it aside before starting to clean the floor. They argue for another while, the Commander seems to be assuring the other man in the military uniform of

some fact or other, though by the time they're about to leave he still seems unconvinced and sour. The American grabs the dead man by the waist and hoists him on his shoulder as easily as if he were no taller or heavier than Levi – though in truth he's nearly the Commander's built – before they both head out the door as quietly as they entered.

The Commander sits heavily on the bed, rubbing at his eyes and glancing at his wrist watch, letting out a groan like he can't believe what time it is. Levi keeps scrubbing at the floor, his mind so full of questions he doesn't know where to start, or whether to leave all of them unasked. The man leans his arms on his knees and says, "You cleaned these floors too, didn't you?"

Levi scoffs. "And your filthy bathtub," he replies sullenly. "If you can't keep this place liveable why don't you get a housekeeper?"

The Commander laughs softly. "I'm sure you can see how in my situation that might be inconvenient," he points out, and Levi nods curtly.

"Right," he says, dropping the rag in the bucket. "So how much will you pay me?"

The man looks up at him suddenly, raising an eyebrow again. "Excuse me?" he asks, sounding amused again as Levi frowns.

"You said you had a job for me," he clarifies, reminding himself as much as the man of their exchange before. "I need something permanent, and regular. And I need to get paid. I'm not picky, but it'll have to be either money or food."

The Commander clears his throat to smother a laugh, and Levi notices for the first time a slight scent of alcohol coming off him. "I can't promise that the work will be permanent or regular, I'm afraid," he says apologetically, "but clearly salary is something that we can discuss."

Levi sneers quietly. "I'll go ahead and save us both some time and tell you how that discussion is going to go," he starts, his frown growing deeper at the sight of the incredulous amusement on the man's face. "I am not mopping up the blood of some dead Nazi pieces of shits for you for nothing. Have you any idea how disgusting this is?" He lifts his blood-tainted hands for emphasis. "And I have mouths to feed at home, so whenever you can't find a dead Nazi for me to clean up after you'll pay me to scrub your shitty floors."

"Or what?"

Levi stares at the man in silence for a moment before saying, "I'll rat you out to the 'Stapo."

"They wouldn't believe you," the man replies before he's fully finished the sentence; the man's expression has grown more composed, but something about his eyes makes Levi think he's enjoying the situation more than he's willing to let on.

"You want to take that chance?" he asks, enjoying the pretence that he actually has anything to bargain with.

“You wouldn’t do it,” the man says next. “They’d catch you too if you did.”

Levi snorts loudly. “You think I wouldn’t take your Nazi arse down with me?” he says, though they both know the man is right. They stare at each other for a moment in complete silence before the Commander utters a quiet laugh.

“I must admit that’s not the attitude we usually look for,” he says, extending a hand to Levi, “but I appreciate your fervour.”

Levi looks at the hand for a moment before shaking it; it still feels uncomfortably warm in his. “Sure,” he says, just like last time. “You should go wash your hands.”

The man laughs. “You don’t need to keep me clean, you know,” he says and Levi snorts.

“Guess again, Herr Brewery,” he mutters as he starts scrubbing the floor again. “Don’t have a bath yet, though, I’m not done cleaning the tub.” He can hear the Commander sighing as he walks out of the room.

When he finally leaves the apartment, a hint of sunrise has started to paint the world in those hues of early grey; the buildings look taller than they did before as Levi walks among them, his steps falling quietly on the old streets. He can smell the fresh summer dew as he crosses the park before following a bridge over the Elbe, walking past the factories with their high chimneys looming above him like towers on castles. When he gets to his street, he’s glad to see there’s nearly nothing left of the blood on the cobbled stones, and he sneaks in, climbing the stairs soundlessly as he makes his way to the apartment.

He steps into the kitchen, startling Isabel at the table where she’s fallen asleep leaning on her arms, an empty plate in front of her and two full ones across the table, potatoes and cabbage in a thin broth, but a warm meal she’s made herself. Something stirs in Levi, something of that anger he felt before, and he marches into the bedroom, stopping by the bed where Farlan is lying fast asleep.

“Get up,” he tells the man, shoving at him with his hand to rouse him; that look of terror comes on his features when he does, but it changes to indifference as soon as he sees Levi.

“Go away, please,” he mutters to his pillow, but Levi grabs his arm indelicately, pulling him out of the bed and onto his feet.

“I said get up,” he repeats as Farlan tries to tear his hand off his arm while he drags him into the kitchen where Isabel is still sitting on her seat. “Look at her,” Levi tells him, shaking him until he lifts his gaze. “She waited for you for so long she fell asleep at the table. Look at the food she made for us. Look at it.”

Farlan’s face is still as sullen as before, equally disinterested, like the only meaningful thing in the world is the pain that he feels. Levi shoves him onto the chair and hits him hard across the mouth, bloodying his lip and raising a new kind of shocked defiance on his features.

“Don’t!” Isabel shouts, but Levi doesn’t care anymore. He leans over the other man.

“‘We’re all in this together’, is that what you said? ‘We’re accountable to one another’, isn’t that it?” He sits down heavily on the empty chair, pulling it closer to Farlan. “Don’t you fucking say shit like that if you think it only applies to everyone else but you.”

Something in Farlan’s expression seems to break; it’s a tiny quiver of his chin, a hint of brightness in his eyes, and Levi goes on.

“We’ve made it this far, the three of us. There’s no reason we can’t make it to the end, but you have to get it together. Those Nazi fucks didn’t catch us and you’re not dead yet.” He grabs the man by the shoulders, forcing him to look him in the eye. “Did you hear me? You’re not dead, you pathetic little shit. So eat your fucking dinner.”

Farlan stares at him for a moment in the utter silence that fills the kitchen, his face blank until slowly the corners of his mouth start to quiver, first pulling his lips to a smile, then a wide smirk. In the end he’s shaking with soundless laughter, wiping tears from his eyes as Levi pulls a handkerchief from his pocket, wiping at the man’s face.

“You’ve got some blood on your chin,” he tells him and Farlan laughs louder. Across the table Isabel joins him and Levi can’t help but smile as well.

When he finally calms down, Farlan turns to his plate and picks up his spoon, shovelling half a potato and a good helping of cabbage in his mouth. “This is actually really good Isabel,” he mumbles before he’s finished his mouthful. “I’m sorry I didn’t come and eat it when you asked.”

She smiles widely at him as Levi starts eating his own cold dinner. “It’s fine, big brother,” she assures him, leaning her elbows on the table. “It’s alright to be sad sometimes, if you’re not sad for too long.”

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- violence
- death
- foul language
- anxiety
- panic attack
- depression
- implied sexual abuse/rape

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

The next update deadline falls on the 9th of October.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Commander and Levi agreed for him to come back on Tuesday afternoon, and that morning Frau Gernhardt invites them all to watch a parade in the city, an idea which Isabel welcomes with excitement that rivals Farlan's reluctance to be a part of a crowd of people. Isabel and Levi leave a few hours after lunch, Hanna and Bruno holding Isabel's hands as Levi and Frau Gernhardt follow behind, talking about how great the weather is; the sun is shining, not a cloud in the sky and the day is so warm that Levi has left without his coat, wearing a pair of grey slacks and an unstarched white collar shirt with the sleeves rolled up. These days he seldom thinks about his looks anymore, but this morning he has peered at his reflection in the smudgy mirror in the communal bathroom longer than usually after shaving his face, wondering how those grey eyes and that oddly youthful face could have caused him so much concern just five years ago. That sort of vanity has become so trivial that it seems as though it must have been someone else in a different life worrying about being too short to attract the right kind of attention.

They join the crowd lining one of the busier streets, passing the Frauenkirche to find a good place to follow the parade. Hanna has climbed on Levi's back to see over the heads of the throng as her brother sits on Isabel's shoulders, pointing at the soldiers walking past. Levi catches glimpses of them through the gaps between people and that anger those uniforms used to raise in him is oddly subtle, like the feeling of being powerless in the face of that evil has eased its hold. His resentment seems more controlled now; it's not eating him alive, not giving form to that bitterness that he's fought so hard to keep at bay. More people keep arriving – parades are still a popular pastime – and soon their little group is enveloped within a mass of people who wave small flags and cheer, their faces alight with the faith they still have in the Reich.

Levi's eyes scan the crowd lazily as he fights to keep Hanna from sliding off his back; the turnout is nothing out of the ordinary, a lot of women, men too old for the military, and children holding on to their mothers' hands. Levi remembers suddenly those first years in Dresden when every day he'd see those yellow stars pinned on people's coats and jackets, fine and tattered alike. When they first appeared Levi was as surprised as everyone else at

how many of them there were, how many of their neighbours wore them, like suddenly announcing something Levi had never realised they shared. He thought a lot about his uncle Kenny during those first days; had he been there he would have been the first to sew that brand onto his clothes and argued viciously with Levi until he'd done the same, no doubt; the thought didn't bring him comfort. As the stars started disappearing one family after the other, Levi found in it a confirmation for that decision he made the night he left Berlin, and now that the stars are all but gone Levi hardly misses them; it's better for him if people forget the Jews ever existed.

It was during those months of the first deportations that Levi ran into Krieger, and had their reunion occurred at any other time Levi wonders whether things would have progressed as they did; even now he remembers clearly the tension of those days, the constant, nagging uneasiness that made Farlan and Isabel restless and afraid. The hunt was relentless then and Krieger seemed like an easy solution, a few months of managing an unpleasant but lucrative balancing act, that's what Levi thought then. It was the worst miscalculation of his life, and bearing the consequences feels all the worse for the foolishness of it, and the dull realisation he's had over the past months that Krieger has no intention of ever giving him what he needs, what Isabel and Farlan need. He remembers the man's drunken declaration of love and shivers, consoling himself with the fact that if Krieger's words had any truth in them, they'd all be drinking tea in a sea-side hotel on the English coast by now. Krieger seems convinced of his own feelings, however, which is enough cause for concern in itself; Levi's seen enough of the world to know how unstable people can get when they've convinced themselves of being in love.

His thoughts move on to the Commander, and a comparison between him and Krieger comes uninvited. He must know ways out of the Reich, unofficial and dangerous, perhaps too risky to make a sound exit strategy, but even if they did, could Levi ask him for such a thing? To try and persuade him like Levi attempted with Krieger is out of the question – he's suffered too much of that for one lifetime as things stand – and the Commander was right in saying no one in their right mind would believe Levi over him should he try any form of blackmail. Levi's lived too long to believe in the goodness of people, and no matter how he's treated Levi so far, the Commander is no exception. Levi wonders whether he's stupid to even wish for more than what the man is already giving him, regular work, money and food being a relief the like of which Levi couldn't have dreamed of just two months ago.

The marching band appears suddenly from around the corner, bringing Levi out of his thoughts. As soon as they've passed, Levi lets Hanna down and she runs to her mother; Bruno is still on Isabel's shoulders when Levi parts from the rest of them before they get to the park, continuing further into the city and, for the first time, into the building through the main door. Judging by the solid stone façade, you wouldn't expect the sort of simplicity the Commander's apartment exemplifies; the soft white of the limestone looks grey where it's not caught by the afternoon sun and the decoratively carved windowpanes cast stubby shadows on the parts of the wall that are. Levi skips up the shiny stone steps to the uppermost floor, still feeling strange about knocking on the door, having made all his previous entries into the apartment through the bedroom window. He glances around himself in the hallway a touch nervously as he waits for the man to answer, wondering what his neighbours would say if they ran into someone like him in the stairwell with his unstarched shirt and un-pressed trousers. When the door finally opens, Levi slips in without further invitation, just like he

does when visiting Krieger, though the absence of reluctance and loathing marks the difference; the man seems taken aback by this, barely thinking to step aside for Levi to come through.

“I see your approach to doors is as invasive as your way with windows,” he says as a way of greeting, and though his words are not unkind they make Levi realise there wasn’t any need for him to enter like that.

Levi clicks his tongue as he walks straight into the sitting room and takes a seat on the sofa. The light is somehow softer in here, maybe due to the faint tint of red on the wooden floors, or the warmth of the shade of green in the wallpaper. Levi breathes deeply again and the pang of nervousness he has felt since entering the building suddenly disappears and he feels in control, of himself and the room, as if it were his home and not the Commander’s.

“So how is this going to work?” he asks, getting right to the matter at hand, whether out of eagerness or some sort of pragmatism he isn’t sure.

The Commander walks over to him, stopping to tower over him in that unnerving way that he does. He’s wearing those uniform trousers again but no jacket, just a starched, white collar shirt like the previous time they met, and those shiny black boots that reach right below the knee of his long legs. He looks very clean to Levi, like someone who has the chance to bathe every day and takes advantage of that, his face is freshly shaven and his hair neatly combed.

“First I’d like to see your papers, please,” the Commander says in that low, resonant voice, “if you don’t mind.”

Even with the request coming from this man in that calm, polite tone, Levi can feel his heart rate picking up. “Why?” he asks, though he’s not sure what reason he has to be suspicious.

“Just to see what is wrong with it,” the man explains, holding out a hand as Levi hesitantly thrusts his own in his pocket.

“Why would there be something wrong with it?” he asks, passing the documentation over.

“There usually is with false identification. Also I need to know who you are supposed to be should anyone ever ask.” He peers down at the identification for a long time before looking up at Levi again. “Theodore Mertz?” he asks, sounding nearly amused as Levi simply shrugs.

“What? I don’t look like a Theodore?” he counters and the man turns his eyes back on the papers.

“Actually no, not in the slightest,” he muses, flipping through the few pages. “Has anyone seen these papers? In an official capacity, that is.”

Levi shrugs again. “The ‘Stapo,” he utters, and the Commander lets out a heavy sigh.

“Well that is useless then,” he says matter-of-factly, throwing the papers on the coffee table. “You shouldn’t even be carrying that around anymore.”

“I’ve got another one,” Levi tells the man, who looks up at him incredulously.

“I’m sorry?” he says as Levi pushes his hand in the other pocket of his trousers and pulls out the other document, the one he acquired a few months after coming to Dresden. He hands the false papers over to the Commander, whose face has returned to its usual severity. “You’re walking around with not one, but two sets of false papers in your pockets?” he asks Levi, who scowls up at him.

“Well you said the first one was useless,” he replies indifferently.

The Commander shakes his head. “How you’re even alive at this point is beyond me,” he mutters as he looks over the other identification. “Lukas Weller? Well, I suppose that is better than Theodore.”

Levi can feel irritation clawing at his chest; who made this bastard master of fake names?

“This one says you were born in Dresden,” the man points out, sounding almost exasperated.

“And what’s wrong with that then?” Levi demands sullenly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Your accent doesn’t match,” the Commander explains, pinching the bridge of his nose for a second. “Anyone with even the slightest ear for dialects can hear you’re from Berlin – and not the good side, either, which is what makes Theodore such a ridiculous choice of a name for you. How many boys did you know growing up named Theodore?”

Levi sucks on his teeth for a second before answering, “Well I knew a Lukas once.”

The Commander sighs again. “And what about these papers then? Has anyone ever seen them?”

“Just my landlady,” Levi tells him, “and I use it for ration stamps.”

The man nods sternly. “And your landlady never asked you why you don’t sound like you’re from Dresden though supposedly you’ve lived here your whole life?”

“I told her my parents were from Berlin,” Levi explains curtly. “She had no problem believing that.”

The Commander passes the papers back to him and sits down in the armchair heavily. “Very well then. As for me, it’ll suffice for our purposes for you to address me as Sturmbannführer Holtz,” he says, crossing one of his legs over the other.

Levi snorts loudly. “If you honestly think I’m going to call you anything with ‘führer’ in it, you are out of your fucking mind,” he declares sourly. “Because I won’t. At least not to your fucking face.”

The man’s expression grows weary, and for a moment it looks to Levi as though he’s about to start his answer with an impatient groan. Instead he takes a deep breath and says, “I’m sure there’s nothing I can do that would stop you from calling me whatever you want. If we are to pretend you’re my housekeeper I’m sure I won’t have to instruct you on maintaining that cover, however.”

“I’m not a fucking idiot,” Levi assures the man, who smiles tiredly.

“Good. So long as that’s settled.”

He leans back in the chair and suddenly he looks older to Levi than he has before; it’s like he’s never noticed those shadows under his eyes until now, and it seems to Levi his careful estimate for the man being in his early 30s may have been a few years off.

“So what’s your story then?” the Commander asks now. “Or rather, what’s the story of Lukas Weller?”

“I was born in Dresden, but my parents moved back to Berlin soon after,” Levi starts without a moment’s hesitation. “When I was eleven my mother died and my father and I moved to Dresden again. I’ve lived here ever since.”

“Is your father still alive?”

Levi shakes his head. “He died six years ago. There was a problem with his liver.”

The Commander nods along, reaches into his pocket for a cigarette case and a pack of matches and lights a smoke, inhaling deeply before asking, “And what about your mother? What did she die of, if I may ask?”

“She killed herself.”

The man raises an eyebrow before scoffing quietly, puffing out a small cloud of smoke. “Suicide?” he says, taking another long drag off the cigarette. “That’s unusual.”

“Maybe on the good side of Berlin,” Levi points out with a shrug, and the man agrees with a grunt.

“What were their names – your parents? Do you have any other family members?”

“Klaus and Louise Weller. My mother’s sister still lives in Berlin with her family, but she never liked my father, so they didn’t keep in touch after my mother died.”

The Commander nods along, uttering a quiet laugh. “You don’t seem very emotional about any of this,” he remarks. “Your parents’ deaths, I mean.”

Levi shrugs again. “My mother died a long time ago. As for my father, he was a useless, good-for-nothing drunk who was more trouble than he was worth. I’m better off on my own anyway,” he explains in that same monotone he’s used so far.

The man smokes on in silence for a while before shaking the burnt tip of his cigarette into an ashtray. “You lie very well. It’s a very useful skill to have.” He keeps quiet for another few seconds before adding, “I’m assuming none of that was true, of course.”

“Not a word,” Levi admits and the man utters another small laugh.

“Did you think of it all now?”

Levi nods. "Most of it."

The Commander looks over at him, those piercing blue eyes bright with something, amusement perhaps, or curiosity. He stops smoking for a few seconds to straighten a cufflink on his shirt; silver swastikas Levi hasn't noticed until now, but now that he has he wishes the man wasn't wearing them.

"You think quickly on your feet," the man says now, his eyes still on Levi like measuring, calculating. "Another useful skill, that. Now I feel I ought to take back what I said before. I'm not surprised that you've managed to stay in hiding for as long as you have."

Levi sneers and frowns. "So you don't wonder why I'm hiding then?" he asks, a thing that's been on the back of his mind since the day they first met. It's clear the man knows what Levi is but he's not said the word once or asked him about it, and after all these years having kept it hidden, Levi isn't sure how to feel about it.

The Commander shakes his head. "It makes no difference to me," he replies matter-of-factly, "though of course you may have a number of reasons. I've found one of the only things the Nazis aren't discriminatory over is who they discriminate against. At times it seems they're almost open to suggestions."

Levi scoffs. "You would know, wouldn't you?" he says and the man agrees.

"As an SS-officer I suppose I would," he replies, "though I have to say that's not exactly the expertise of my department. We just make and keep the records."

"Records of what?"

"Service records of the officers of the Waffen-SS and the Allgemeine-SS," the man explains briefly, exhaling slowly and putting out the cigarette.

"So you're just some useless pencil pusher?" Levi asks, genuinely surprised. From how the man looks he has pictured him commanding troops or training future officers or... well, not sitting in an office making records.

The Commander laughs louder than before. "Yes, I suppose I am," he says, clearly not offended. "Though I'm sure you understand a fair bit of useful information comes my way from time to time, doing what I do."

Something in Levi burns for the man to keep talking, to tell him the whole story and he can't keep himself from asking, "But you're not really a Nazi, are you? Not even really German." Somehow it feels like he's looking for reassurance, though he's not sure why; there is no unease left for the man to settle by doing or saying anything.

"My mother is Austrian," he tells Levi. "Holtz is her maiden name, and I was born in Vienna. As far as being a Nazi goes, well, clearly I'm a party member, but I must admit our ideologies differ in certain aspects."

"And what are those then?"

“Oh, just about all of them I believe,” the Commander says with a smile, “at least concerning racial purity and other such matters. But I’m sure you didn’t come here to talk about politics or philosophy, and I hope you’ll forgive me for not divulging any more personal information at this point.”

A little voice in Levi’s mind groans with disappointment, but he keeps his expression steady as he nods.

“I believe you wanted to know more about your role in all of this?” the man asks now and Levi nods again. “I’m sure you’ll understand that though you posing as my housekeeper is not a bad idea in itself, it would be very inconvenient for me to have you barging in whenever you please. Not that you haven’t done so in the past.”

There’s a hint of accusation in the man’s voice that makes Levi wonder whether he is a bit dismayed about having to kill that man back then, but Levi merely sneers. “You could learn to shut your fucking windows when you’re not at home,” he points out. “For all I know you left it open on purpose so you wouldn’t have to scrub your own shitty floors.”

“Be that as it may,” the man goes on, still sounding a touch displeased, “I’d prefer it if we kept our meetings to an arranged schedule. I will try to make it as regular as I possibly can,” he hurries to add when he sees Levi is about to protest, “but I will make no promises at this point. As for the other thing, you will be contacted when your services are required. You will often receive the time and place on rather a short notice, I’m afraid, but such is the nature of the job.”

“Who were the other men?” Levi asks suddenly as the question comes into his head. “The American and the one who looked like he had a swastika thrust up his arse?”

The corners of the Commander’s mouth twitch almost imperceptibly before he clears his throat and says, “You shouldn’t worry about that. All you need to know at this point is that they’re part of the operation.”

“The same operation as you and I?” Levi asks eagerly, like that word has lit a fire inside him.

The man hurries to shake his head. “You’re not officially a part of it. You only answer to me at this point.”

“Why?”

“I haven’t cleared it with my superiors yet,” the Commander explains. “We weren’t looking for outside help, if I’m being completely honest, and there are always risks to consider in involving more people into this.”

Levi frowns. “So why did you?” he asks. “And why me?”

“It was you who offered your assistance, if memory serves,” the man reminds Levi almost kindly. “As to why I accepted your offer I can only say I have a presentiment about you.”

“You some kind of a spiritualist?” Levi asks without bothering to hide the mocking tone in his voice.

The man utters a quiet laugh. “No, I can’t say that I am. I’m simply good at reading people and situations, and my intuition is seldom wrong. It’s that instinct that tells me you will prove useful in the future.”

“So you’re basing all of this on a hunch?” Levi clarifies almost incredulously.

“For the most part I’m basing my decision on my observations of you,” the man counters calmly. “I’ve talked about your instinct for survival before – that sort of unyielding persistence is not a common feature in people like you. You judge situations quickly and accurately, not unlike myself, and you have physical strength that is very surprising in someone who has been in your situation for as long as you have – not to mention someone of your built.”

“People like you’,” Levi repeats sullenly, feeling a sudden surge of anger and disappointment building in his chest. “You keep saying that, so how about you also say what you actually mean by it.”

The Commander’s expression is undecipherable for a moment before he says, “Like I said, your reasons for hiding your true identity are no business of mine.”

“But that’s what you mean, isn’t it?” Levi can’t keep the accusing tone from his voice. “It’s surprising for a Jew to fight as hard as I have to stay alive, is that it?”

“That’s not exactly what I—”

“Because you know as well as I do that there are no labour camps in the east,” Levi goes on, feeling that numbing dread, thinking about Krieger’s threats; it’s not forced labour he’s warning Levi about, this much has been clear to him from the start. “Not for Jews anyway. It’s not as if we haven’t all known for years, or suspected at the very least. It’s not as if we didn’t see all of this coming, even if we didn’t want to believe it, and still we went along, nice and quiet, into ghettos, onto trains, never making a fuss. Is that why it’s so surprising that someone like me would fight it?”

For a moment the Commander seems to Levi sad and tired before his features return to their usual controlled indifference. “I apologise if my words have offended you,” he states solemnly. “I never meant to imply your heritage was directly connected to how I’ve interpreted my observations of you. I simply think that most people don’t have the will to keep fighting for as long as you have.”

“And I simply think you don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Levi counters, remembering the young man making a run for it even with armed soldiers behind his back.

The man is quiet for a long while, and it seems to Levi like he’s actually considering his words; his brows are heavy over his eyes as he looks at Levi, though it doesn’t seem like he really sees him. His right hand is slowly turning one of the cufflinks around, thumb running

across the polished silver over and over while he thinks, his gaze sharp, and Levi knows no one has ever taken anything he's said so seriously.

Finally the Commander sighs heavily. "You're right," he admits, looking suddenly apologetic. "Your situation – and that of others like you – is unknown to me. I can also admit now that my assessment was very inaccurate. I apologise again, and I hope you'll forgive me this mistake."

A stunned silence falls on the room as Levi stares at the man. No one like him has ever valued Levi's opinion over their own, or thought he could know more about something than they do, and coming from someone so obviously highly educated it's even more surprising to Levi, who has barely read one book in his entire life. Not to mention that usually people in the position the Commander is in seem to be naturally prone to never admitting they could be wrong about anything.

"Sure," he replies, still a bit stunned. "Just try not to say shit like that again."

The Commander smiles. "I will do my very best," he promises, getting up from his seat. "Tea?" he asks casually and Levi agrees in a grunt as the man leaves the room to enter the small kitchen.

Levi's eyes find the secretaire instantly and his thoughts go to the letter. Considering this new information, do those crossed out words reveal anything they didn't before? Clearly now the man writing about his morals isn't as ridiculous a notion and Levi has no problem imagining him having misgivings about refusing his help from someone who needed it. As for the loneliness, Levi imagines it can't be that different from his own, that constant feeling of unease you can't communicate to anyone, that constant need to remember to be somebody else, to act and talk like somebody else. He supposes it must be harder for the Commander, having to live in a foreign country, though now that he thinks about it it's not as if Germany has felt like a home to him either, not since he was a little boy. That feeling of isolation that comes from having spent most of your life being the object of constant, unwavering hostility – not even Farlan and Isabel truly understand that. This thought is somehow comforting, the things he shares with the Commander, and Levi frowns at it as he looks around the room, eyes stopping at the bedroom door that is now closed.

In a flash he remembers that night, the Commander stumbling in with that man, hurriedly fumbling with the buttons of his shirt while his lips fell hastily on a mouth, a neck, a cheek. Levi thought the letter was meant to be sent to a woman due to the intimacy, but considering what happened that night why couldn't it have been addressed to a man? Levi wonders whether it had been the Commander's plan all along to kill that Nazi bastard; seems like quite a risk to take, to be fooling around with one if it wasn't. Not that that sort of thing doesn't happen – even in those circles – and after all, it's not as if Krieger isn't up to the same sort of mischief, though it occurs to Levi that the Commander seems to have a lot more at stake than he does.

The man returns moments later with the tea, laying the tray on the coffee table before sitting down and pouring Levi a cup, adding a splash of milk into it before handing it over. Levi sips at it greedily, nearly burning his tongue; that smell of bergamot orange is nearly intoxicating.

“There’s something I’d like to know, if you don’t mind telling me,” the Commander says as Levi stirs his tea to cool it down faster. “How long have you really been living in Dresden?”

“Almost five years,” Levi tells him, not really sure why he’d mind giving out that information.

“And would you say you know the city well?”

Levi scoffs. “Yes, I’d say that,” he replies, that mocking tone creeping back into his voice.

The Commander looks pleased as he sips at his tea. “I’ve only been here for about a year myself,” he explains, “and I’m afraid I still have a lot to learn. Perhaps that’s another area where you can show your usefulness?”

“Maybe,” Levi answers a touch hesitantly. “I guess you mean if things get dodgy I’ll know good places to hide and ways to get around without people noticing.”

“Is that something you’ve considered?” the man asks him now, looking serious. “It’s a risk you’ll take when you become a part of this. This might end up costing you your life.”

Levi clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth again. “Sitting quietly in my apartment might cost me my life,” he says. “Walking down the street might cost me my life. So might looking for work, or getting my ration stamps, or using them. Dying is something I’ve considered long before you came along. There’s nothing new about that thought.”

The Commander’s expression is hard to read; he seems at the same time oddly pleased and almost saddened by Levi’s words, but in the end he simply says, “Good. I wouldn’t want you to have any misconceptions about what we’re doing here and what sort of sacrifices it may require.”

“You know I’m not doing this for you,” Levi points out suddenly, making the Commander look up from his cup of tea. “I’m not doing this for your country, or any other country for that matter. I’m doing this for myself. As far as I’m concerned you’re just helping me get it done.”

The man smiles again. “Of course,” he agrees. “I never imagined otherwise.”

Levi starts drinking his tea in silence. It seems so strange to him all of a sudden, how this is the same man who cut someone’s throat without so much as blinking, sitting here with his cup of tea, talking to Levi in a way no one ever has before, as if he were his equal. Considering all the ways in which they’re not makes it even more out of place. Levi wonders whether the Commander sees the strangeness in his behaviour or whether he treats everyone like this, though how he’s ever managed to convince anyone of being a Nazi with that attitude, Levi doesn’t know.

“Well, that about covers it all I think,” the man suddenly says, emptying his cup of tea in one big gulp. “I’ll prepare us some dinner in a while. Whatever food I have you can take home with you when you leave.”

“Can I use your bathroom?” Levi asks as the Commander picks up the morning’s newspaper from a side table and folds it open.

“Only if you promise not to tell me what you did in there,” the man replies with his eyes on the front page. “At least not when we’re eating.”

After Levi has concluded his business he rummages through the cleaning supplies again before starting in the kitchen, standing on a chair to reach the top shelves of the cupboards, which are as filthy as he has anticipated. The job manages to feel exciting for the first half an hour when Levi still expects to find some of the man’s personal items placed half hidden behind the stacks of cups and plates, but it soon dawns on him that he will find nothing of the sort in this room either. After that the work is routine-like, but pleasant; he does the dishes and dusts the furniture, opens the windows and scrubs the floors, leaving the planks gleaming in the orange glow of the setting sun. The Commander spends twenty minutes reading the newspaper before unlocking the secretaire and starting his typing.

“There are some dirty clothes in the bedroom,” he tells Levi in passing as he wipes down the bookshelf. “There’s a laundry room in the basement, or you can wash them in the bathtub if you prefer.”

Levi grunts a reply as he walks over to the man to run the rag across the top of the secretaire, feeling the Commander follow him with his eyes as he does and he seems to want to say something but in the end turns mutely back to his typing. After the dusting, Levi moves on to the laundry, a few of those white collar shirts and two pairs of uniform trousers, socks and underwear that hardly seem like they’ve been worn a full day. Every item is stainless, almost eerily so, like they’ve been on a mannequin and not a real person and though Levi appreciates it – scrubbing shit stains out of someone else’s underwear not being a thing he enjoys doing – he can’t help feeling a touch frustrated. Is there nothing to be found in this apartment that makes the Commander a person, makes him flawed and human? Levi’s hopes for running into anything besides that letter are looking slim at best. He doesn’t understand why it bothers him so much and makes him feel so impatient to keep running into this façade everywhere he turns. After all, the Commander is nothing to him, just a convenient meal ticket for the time being. And still Levi frowns as he sniffs at the fabric of the shirt, which smells of next to nothing, just faint traces of soap and cigarette smoke.

Levi mixes the starch in a bucket before dipping in the shirts, placing them on hangers to dry over the bathtub. When he walks back to the living room, the Commander has finished his typing; Levi can hear soft clinks and clangs coming from the kitchen. He follows the sounds to find the man peeling potatoes into a small pot. There’s a long paper package on the table next to him, and when Levi pulls at a corner to unwrap it, he sees a small glimpse of a fillet of fish.

“Is this what’s for dinner?” he asks, fighting to keep the excitement from his voice. He can’t remember the last time he had fresh fish.

“Yes,” the Commander replies, chopping the last one of the potatoes and dropping it into the pot. “There should be enough for you to take home for those mouths you have to feed.”

Levi frowns. "They had better not come into this," he says almost heatedly, that worry for Farlan and Isabel pressing on his mind as soon as the man has uttered these words.

"Your personal situation, whatever it is, is none of my concern," the Commander hurries to assure him. "I'd rather know as little as possible about it, if I'm being completely honest – especially if it involves children."

"It doesn't," Levi replies instantly, not sure why he wants the man to know this and suddenly surprised he thinks of Isabel as an adult despite her age.

"Good," the man says impassively. "I find they tend to complicate things."

"So you don't have any either then?"

The Commander's expression never falters and Levi isn't sure whether he's just imagining his posture growing more rigid. "The less you know about me, the better," he merely says, wiping his hands on a tea towel, and Levi feels like huffing in frustration.

"Right," he mutters a touch sourly, sitting down at the kitchen table. The man joins him after placing a lid on the pot of potatoes.

"So you're done for today then?" he asks almost kindly and Levi nods.

"I really should come back tomorrow to iron out those clothes," he remarks, but the man shakes his head.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible, but I appreciate the effort you're willing to put into this," he tells Levi matter-of-factly. "As for the clothes I'm sure I can manage the ironing myself."

Levi shrugs, though he feels a sting of disappointment.

"Could I perhaps entrust the preparation of dinner to you this time?" the Commander asks him now. "I have a lot of work to do."

Levi shrugs again. "I am the housekeeper," he remarks dryly and the man hums in agreement.

"I suppose you are," he says, getting up. "I guess it's about time I put your cooking skills to the test in any case."

Levi scoffs. "An idiot can boil potatoes and fry up a piece of fish," he says to the man's back.

"But you're not an idiot," he replies, "and my expectations are higher for it."

Levi calls him back into the kitchen half an hour later; he's fried the fish in butter on a heavy cast iron skillet and set the table with those impersonal white plates, plain cutlery and tall glasses. When the Commander enters the room he sits down right away, leaving Levi to serve the food to him at the table. There's something about the familiarity with which the man meets this gesture that makes Levi wonder again about that comment he made about children. If the Commander does have children, that's likely to mean he has had a wife at some point

in his life, someone who has served him his meals like Levi is now, someone who has made him get familiar with it.

Before Levi sits down to join him, he wraps up the left over fish to take home to Farlan and Isabel, along with a few boiled potatoes, a chunk of butter and half a loaf of bread. The Commander sits at the table and watches him measure out the food but says nothing about the quantities.

“You should take what’s left of the apple jam as well,” he tells Levi. “I haven’t much of a sweet tooth.”

Levi grabs the jar from the pantry before joining the man at the table. Suddenly, without the constant clicking of the typewriter, the room seems very quiet, but not uncomfortably so; there is no struggle to find things to say, or a need to say anything at all. The Commander eats his portion neatly, every mouthful perfectly proportioned with fish and potato in balanced measures. Levi looks him over inconspicuously, taking in that air of impersonal cleanliness that is at the same time calming and frustrating. Levi can see how the man would be able to pass it off as nothing more than military neatness and meticulousness, but to him it raises too many questions to come off as ordinary. He’s never met anyone like this man and he can’t imagine how others could think differently. There is nothing usual about his manner and still nothing that really sticks out, either. Levi doesn’t realise he’s stared at the Commander for a moment too long until the piercing gaze of those blue eyes registers in his brain and he turns hurriedly back to his fish.

“Was there something you wanted to—”

“Just mind your own business,” Levi mutters to his plate, and the Commander laughs quietly.

“As you wish,” he says, finishing the last mouthful on his plate. “Another cup of tea before you go?”

Levi shakes his head, stuffing the rest of his food into his mouth all at once. Though he knows he should be getting home, he takes his time washing the dishes as the Commander returns to his typing once again. Before Levi leaves with his parcels of food, he wishes he could sneak up behind the man to look at the pages he’s been working on all day, but as soon as he steps in his direction the Commander suddenly speaks up, making Levi flinch.

“There’s some money on that side table for you,” he says without a pause to the steady stream of clicks and cranks. “I thought it appropriate since it’ll likely be a while until I have use for you again. You will be contacted when occasion arises. I hope you won’t find the payment offensive.”

Levi walks over to the table and grabs the money – the sum of which is not insignificant – and puts it quickly into his pocket.

“Why the fuck would I be offended by you paying me for the work I do?” he asks in a mumble which the Commander doesn’t seem to hear over the typewriter. He’s busy pulling a sheet of paper from the machine and Levi realises only now that he locks each page in the top drawer of the secretaire as soon as he finishes it. When Levi finally steps out into the hallway,

he's wondering what's so important on those pieces of paper that it can't be left lying around even for one minute.

When he gets home, Farlan cooks the fish for himself and Isabel while Levi spreads apple jam on three slices of bread for their dessert. When they ask him where he's been he simply says "work" and they don't question him further, perhaps sensing his reluctance to talk about it. In all of the uncertainty of his dealings with the Commander this is the only thing that is absolutely clear to him: Isabel and Farlan are to have nothing to do with it and the longer he can keep it from them entirely the better.

"Guess what, big brother?" Isabel says excitedly as they're finishing their sandwiches. "Farlan came with me to Frau Gernhardt's today!"

Levi can't help his eyebrows rising. "Really?" he asks Farlan, who has blushed lightly.

"There's really no need to make it into a big deal," he insists, though not very heatedly. "I never even left the building."

"But it's a step in the right direction!" Isabel counters loudly. "You shouldn't act like it's nothing just because someone else has achieved more than you. If it's a big deal for you then it is a big deal."

Farlan's blush deepens as he shoves the rest of the bread in his mouth to have an excuse not to answer. Levi smiles warmly as he grabs the man's head, forcing him to face him.

"Don't be so fucking modest," he tells Farlan, whose eyes are bright as he stares back at him, and Levi reaches over to plant a quick kiss on the man's cheek.

"Sure," Farlan agrees quietly as Levi gets a pack of cards. They play until Isabel starts nodding off in her chair and barely manages to climb into her bed. Levi and Farlan stay up a while longer, lying in bed and talking about nothing in particular, finally falling asleep, languid arms thrown casually around each other.

Several weeks pass without a word from the Commander, weeks during which Levi struggles to find anything meaningful to do. It's difficult to keep busy in a home that's clean and full of books but not much else, Levi having never been the reading type and Farlan busy with his pen and paper on most days and Isabel off on her own business about the city. Going around asking for work seems useless now and walking around without a purpose feels to Levi like he's looking for trouble. During this time they all get into the habit of spending a few evenings a week at Frau Gernhardt's, listening to the news on the radio, though it does little to ease Levi mind. The German army seems to advance as unbeatably as ever, successfully stopping an enemy invasion on the coast of Normandy in early June; Levi wonders absently whether any of the Commander's allies were captured or killed during the invasion. The only thing that lifts his spirits is Farlan's growing courage; a few weeks after his visit to the Commander's they make a nervous trip to the shop for their rations and though Farlan spends

most of the rest of the day napping restlessly, Levi can't help feeling like something of the agitation he felt before has finally broken.

Another week passes and Levi's frustration turns slowly into irritation until finally he decides to take matters into his own hands, showing up at the Commander's door uninvited late on a Friday evening. It seems to Levi that the man takes far too long to answer the door, blocking the entrance efficiently with his body as soon as he sees Levi, clearly remembering his usual intrusiveness.

"What are you doing here?" he asks instantly, keeping his voice oddly quiet; his expression is bordering on angry and for a second Levi hesitates, until that annoyance takes over again.

"We agreed on regular work," he counters. "It's been almost a month. How the fuck is that regular?"

The Commander looks even angrier as he says, "I told you I can't guarantee any of that. I also told you it would be a while before I'd need you again. Now I'm just wondering which part of those two sentences you misunderstood."

Levi frowns as something akin to distress claws at his chest.

"You're the one who told me you're not an idiot," the Commander goes on. "It didn't take me long to realise you're uneducated, but I thought such simple instructions wouldn't confuse even someone like you."

Levi wants to say something, to tell the man to stop talking like he knows Levi, to tell him to fuck right off with his know-it-all attitude and that fucking superiority complex that makes him so alike the Nazis he claims to hate that at that moment Levi can barely tell the difference. But he can't say anything, the words won't come out and he's left staring angrily at the man as he leans closer to Levi.

"You will be contacted when you are needed. I must ask you not to come here without my orders again," he tells Levi in no uncertain terms as he starts to close the door.

"Who was that, darling?" The voice that calls out from the sitting room is a woman's, and Levi can just hear the Commander's response before the door swings shut.

"No one," he says. "Just someone asking for directions."

A new kind of frustration fills Levi's mind as he makes his way back home across the city, like a hammering anger, disappointment and worst of all embarrassment. Not only does he feel like he's been insulted, he feels as though he's been scolded by someone in a position of authority, but to admit he sees the Commander as such would only add to the irritation that's building in his chest.

As he's crossing the river it begins to rain and by the time Levi gets home he's not only annoyed but cold and wet and the only remedy at his disposal is a dismal lukewarm bath in the communal bathroom, interrupted fifteen minutes later by Frau Niemeyer, who doesn't neglect to say "Heil Hitler" as Levi passes her in the hallway; being in such a foul mood Levi

resents saying it back even though the years have made it slip from his tongue so easily the words have become all but meaningless.

Another week passes with Levi doing his utmost to keep himself from thinking about the Commander, though the encounter keeps replaying itself in his mind. After so many days to calm down, the anger the man made him feel has nearly subsided and that sting of shame has grown stronger. It's true Levi had no business being there on that night. The instructions the Commander gave him were very clear. It seems foolish for Levi to have let his emotions get the best of him like that, to let his eagerness overpower reason, though he knows the Commander had no business talking about him being stupid like he did and for that Levi still mutters "bastard" under his breath whenever he remembers it.

On Saturday they're all sitting around in the apartment, even Isabel, who has busied herself with her newspaper clippings as Farlan reads and Levi polishes a set of brass candle sticks in the kitchen. The day has been hot and still and through the open window Levi can hear the first soft rumbling of approaching thunder. He's just finished with the first candle stick when Isabel falls back on her bed and sighs heavily.

"We should do something," she says, swinging her legs back and forth over the side of the bed. "Something exciting."

"Like what?" Farlan asks, eyes still on the page.

"Something we don't usually do," she explains. "It's been such a dull day."

Farlan puts his book down on the table and says, "We could go to Frau Gernhardt's and listen to the radio."

Isabel yawns. "Something more exciting than that," she complains. "Besides, Hanna and Bruno will be listening to their programmes now."

"We could go see a film," Levi suggests quietly, folding the polishing rag into the cleaning cupboard. "You both like those, don't you?"

Isabel's face lights up as Farlan's grows worried and weary. "Could we really, big brother?" she asks breathily, her eyes bright with excitement.

"Can we afford something like that?" Farlan asks next and Levi nods.

"I have some money saved up," he explains; the last of what the Commander gave him. "We could probably even get sodas."

"Really?" Isabel exclaims. "I've never had one. What's it like?"

"Sweet," Levi tells her before turning to Farlan. "Do you feel like this is something you could do?"

Farlan frowns as he considers the question, his eyes flicking to the open window and back for a long while before he says, “Sure. Let’s do it.”

Isabel jumps up from her bed and runs over to Farlan, throwing her arms tightly around him. “I know you can do it, big brother,” she whispers audibly, making the man’s expression grow ever more determined.

They leave the apartment just as the rain starts to fall, huddling under two rickety umbrellas as they walk down the cobbled street. Farlan has turned his coat collars up and is sporting a ridiculous wide-brimmed hat even though Levi told him it does nothing to make him look inconspicuous. At least the weather excuses his outfit and expectedly no one pays them any mind as they make their way into the city. When a noisy group of soldiers passes them on the bridge, Farlan grabs Levi’s arm tightly; he can hear Farlan’s breathing turning into shallow panting and even in the dim evening light he can see all the colour has drained from his face.

“You’re alright,” Levi tells the man under his breath. “They’ve got nothing to do with you.”

“I know,” Farlan replies in a breathy whisper. “I know that, but it’s not rational, how I feel.”

“Of course not,” Levi says. “Just remember you have your papers, and I’m right here.”

Farlan nods emphatically, speeding up his steps to catch up with Isabel who has reached the end of the bridge. The soldiers go on their way without looking at them twice. When they reach the cinema Levi lets Farlan and Isabel argue over which film to see while he keeps an eye on the crowd. The uniforms are far and few between, just a couple of soldiers entertaining their lady friends and Levi feels himself relax a little.

As he half-listens to Isabel and Farlan’s bickering, his mind starts to wander back to the Commander and the woman he was entertaining when Levi barged to his door. The familiar way she addressed the man didn’t escape Levi then, and he feels it has done nothing to satisfy his curiosity. Was she the intended recipient of the letter? Could she be the Commander’s wife? A mistress doesn’t seem too far-fetched an option to Levi either, considering the fact the Commander’s appetites clearly extend all the way to fellow Nazi officers.

His train of thought is interrupted when someone bumps forcibly against his shoulder – a man in a dark trench coat – and Levi feels him reaching for his pocket. Before he has made a move the stranger has apologised and moved on, disappearing into the throng of people. Levi’s hand immediately flies to his pocket to make sure nothing is missing, but instead of the dreaded lack of money he finds it’s all still there, the money and something else, a folded piece of paper. Levi turns it around in his hand without pulling it out. He glances up to catch a glimpse of the man’s back but he is nowhere to be seen and without hesitating further Levi hands Farlan the money.

“You go and get the tickets. I need to use the bathroom.”

Farlan looks as if he’s about to protest, but Isabel grabs his arm excitedly, pulling him toward the ticket stand.

“Come on then!” she commands him eagerly and Farlan follows her reluctantly. Levi can just make out her saying, “You know how important it is to big brother” as he makes his way to the lavatories.

He goes into a stall and yanks the piece of paper out of his pocket. The note is short, written in pencil in a neat, plain hand: Thursday, 23:00, and an address Levi doesn’t recognise though he prides himself in knowing most streets in Dresden inside and out. His first guess would be a residential area somewhere outside the city, but he’d need a map to make sure. He holds the note tightly in his hand for a minute, memorises the address and flushes the piece of paper down the toilet before exiting the bathroom.

Isabel and Farlan have agreed on a film, something with singing and adventure and romance, though the plot escapes Levi as his mind keeps going over the note. Whoever it was who passed it to him must have been following him, has perhaps followed him for weeks now. It’s hardly surprising given the circumstance but Levi can’t help feeling uncomfortable about it all the same. It seems to him the Commander must have been talking out of his arse when he said Levi’s personal life was none of his business – clearly he considers it his business enough to have people watch Levi’s every move. Of course it is possible it wasn’t the Commander who ordered it, but considering Levi only answers to him, it doesn’t seem likely anyone else would be passing him notes like this.

After the film ends Levi makes good on his promise and buys them a bottle of soda each, which they drink through straws as they make their way home, Farlan having insisted that they don’t stay in the café. Behind the smile he’s drawn on his face the man seems exhausted to Levi; it doesn’t take much to guess the façade is there for Isabel, who has finished her soda by the time they reach the river again. The rain has stopped and Levi sips thoughtfully at his beverage as he watches Farlan and Isabel; the two have walked ahead, Farlan has lost all the hesitation in his step, and they’ve stopped to peer down at the Elbe, leaning over the railings as they wait for Levi to catch up to them. They continue side by side, Isabel pointing out the lights dancing on the water and laughing, making even Farlan chuckle nervously.

When they get home she goes straight to bed, pulling the day’s newspaper from under her coat – Levi hasn’t noticed her finding it – and starting to browse through it in search of U-Boats. Levi and Farlan wish her good night and climb under the covers in the bedroom; Farlan lies still for a long time, his back turned to Levi and his breathing uneven. He’s drawn the blanket all the way up to his chin though the room is warm and when Levi shuffles closer to him he flinches, like he has forgotten he’s not alone in the bed.

“You were very brave today,” Levi finally says; it’s taken him a while to think of something. His hand is stroking Farlan’s hair, and under his touch he seems to calm down.

Farlan scoffs. “People do that all the time,” he counters, turning clumsily onto his back. “Though I suppose I shouldn’t think about other people.”

Levi agrees quietly, leaning over the other man; there’s that feeling again, that yearning for warmth and affection but not like before. This time it doesn’t feel like a shield against the rest of the world, it feels more natural, more like it did before, in Berlin when he was younger and everything was only starting to turn to shit. There’s something unreadable in Farlan’s face as he lies under Levi, ears blushing lightly and eyes bright. It seems that like Levi he’s

remembering something, living the past and not the present, and Levi can see it in his eyes when he comes back, sad and jaded and missing someone to whom Levi is a poor substitute. He turns back onto his side and Levi cuddles up to him, pressing his face against the nape of his neck, breathing in that scent he can barely smell these days.

They don't talk about it, but before he falls asleep Levi whispers, "Isabel is really proud of you, you know."

"I'm pretty proud of myself to be honest," Farlan says, chuckling quietly.

Three days later Levi can still remember that feeling when he walks into Krieger's apartment, that exhilarating feeling of what sex used to be before Krieger showed up in Dresden. Like so many times since that night in April, Levi barely says a word to the man, barely even looks at him even after Krieger's gotten what Levi's there for. When they lie next to each other on the bed, Levi thinks about the Nazi officer drowning in his own blood, that clean slash across his throat, that ease with which he fell down when the Commander finally let go. It's a curious thought to him now, intriguing instead of nauseating, the fact that under every uniform is simply a man, a person of flesh and blood who can die as quickly and easily as that.

"You've stopped begging for crumbs off my table," Krieger says to him, lighting a cigarette and grinning. "What's that about? Hmm? Surely you've not started eating rats. Cannibalism is such a horrible thing, you know."

Levi rolls his eyes, barely grunting, "I found work. I don't need your charity anymore."

"Not my charity, no. Just my help," Krieger muses as he smokes. "And my cock. Isn't that right?"

His hand falls indelicately on Levi's arse and he shoves it away impatiently. "I have to work on Thursday so I won't be coming around," he states plainly, sitting up in the bed.

Krieger's wide grin dies on his face as he hears this. "What do you mean you won't?" he asks Levi confrontationally. "Who told you it's up for you to decide when you come here or not? Hmm?"

"It's not up to me," Levi explains, pushing his words through gritted teeth. "It's because I have to work, you fucking idiot."

Krieger's hand is quick in wrapping around his arm; the man pulls him closer and forces him back down on the mattress. "Don't you fucking talk to me like that, you filthy Jewish bitch," he growls, bringing his face closer to Levi's. "You should be kissing my feet for what I'm doing to you. It's much more than little shits like you deserve."

Levi can feel blood surging through his body as that rage stirs in him and he knows if he had a razor in his hand right now, he'd be up to his elbows in Krieger's blood in less than a second. He grabs the man's hand and yanks it off, pushing him away forcefully as Krieger

picks up his cigarette jerkily and keeps smoking, looking angry and sullen. He grabs Levi's arm again as he makes to get out of bed, pulling him back much more gently this time.

"I'm sorry, I lost my temper," he says softly into Levi's ear, "but you really shouldn't provoke me like that when you know full well what I'm like."

Levi closes his eyes for a second as shivers run down his arms. "Sure," he barely grunts, pulling himself free from the man again but staying in the bed.

"I know I shouldn't call you names," Krieger nearly purrs at him. "I should be good to you. You know I can be good to you, don't you? Hmm?"

The man's hand comes down on Levi's shoulder, his thumb moving up and down his neck; Levi senses the touch is supposed to be soothing, but all it does is make his muscles tense to a point of causing him pain. He doesn't turn to look at Krieger as he puts out the half-smoked cigarette and shuffles closer to him.

"You know I like to see you like that, enjoying me," the man tells him quietly. "It makes me happy that I can still do that, even though you're so sick of me by now."

Levi wants to wrap his hands around the man's throat and shout it all to his face, how he's never made Levi feel anything but sick, how the effort he puts in getting Levi aroused is the most revolting thing in the world to him, but he stays quiet, always quiet, always forced into silence by that wordless threat between them.

"Maybe that's how you'd like to make it up to me? Hmm? Not coming to me on Thursday, like I want?" Krieger's hand moves down his back, wrapping around his waist as the man leans his chin on his shoulder. "Come now, Levi. We both know you've done it before."

Levi suppresses another shudder at the sound of his name falling out of Krieger's mouth, foreign and polluted, so hateful that at that moment he wishes he really was called Lukas. "It's not my fault I have to work," he says as he stands up slowly and pulls on his clothes, leaving the apartment as quickly and quietly as he can.

When he gets home he can't bring himself to get close to Farlan – that rage and desperation he's feeling wouldn't be good for him – so he spends the rest of the night on the sofa, sleeping restlessly and dreaming of trains heading east until Isabel nudges on his sleeve in the morning, telling him he was moaning in his sleep and asking why he hasn't slept in his bed.

"I came back late. I didn't want to wake Farlan," Levi explains as he gets up and rubs the sleep from his eyes. He washes himself quickly in the bathroom and joins his friends for breakfast, slowly re-joining the world one sip of grain coffee at a time.

By Thursday Levi has managed to reduce Krieger to nothing more than background noise to his life, a constant source of anger and anxiety in the back of his mind but without the power to take over his thoughts. He has managed to take a look at a map, popping into a post office on his way to get their rations for the week and finding the location at the very edge of town.

Levi has never been to that neighbourhood but he knows its reputation and realises quickly that simply walking down the street isn't an option; in the midst of those fancy houses he would stick out like a sore thumb.

As the evening darkens into night, Levi follows the route he's planned in advance, going around for miles and approaching the location through a patch of forest that circles a pond behind the house. He waits, keeping an eye on his watch until eleven o'clock sharp before crossing over to the back door, which he is surprised to find unlocked. Just before he crosses the threshold, Levi's heart starts pounding as he begins to doubt the note, the Commander, all of it, and only reminding himself that if the man wanted him dead he'd be long gone by now helps steady his hands as he steps into a spacious kitchen. He crosses it swiftly and soundlessly, following a source of light through the building and into what looks like a private library where he finds the Commander sitting in an armchair, smoking a cigarette calmly as he looks down at a body lying on the floor.

"Your timing is impeccable," the man greets Levi, standing up steadily though something about the redness of his cheeks suggests he's had more than one drink that night. "I appreciate that."

Levi barely grunts as he stares at the corpse lying face down in a puddle of blood on the hardwood floor. The body belongs to a man in another revolting uniform with greying hair and a bony face with a weak chin. His dead eyes are staring straight ahead and his mouth is slightly open in a look of utter surprise; it's clear to Levi he didn't see the attack coming. He looks down at the uniform, the dark grey fabric, the medals on his chest, the swastika-marked armband as red as the pool in which he's lying. Levi feels a shiver run through his body and he wonders whether the nervousness he's feeling is due more to fear or excitement.

"I see you've been busy," he remarks dryly, looking around himself. There are empty glasses littering nearly every horizontal surface and there's a long table full of half-empty bottles in the corner.

"It was quite the party," the Commander replies, his face oddly serious. "We'd better not waste any time."

Levi nods sternly as he re-enters the kitchen, going through several of the tall cupboards before finding the cleaning supplies. By the time he gets back to the library, the Commander and the body have vanished; without thinking about it further Levi gets to mopping up the blood, which has not spread onto the Persian rugs, whether by the Commander's design or by a stroke of luck, Levi doesn't care. As the stain on the floor grows fainter Levi starts breathing easier and when he finally pours out the dirty water he feels sure about his decisions for the first time in months. If there was still a part of him that wished for the Commander to help him out of the Reich it is gone now, and even regular work, money and food are nothing compared to this. It's not the killing and blood itself he enjoys – it's the feeling of being able to do something, to make a difference, to be a person after so many years of being no one. What else could the man offer that would come anywhere close to this?

He waits for the Commander in the library, calm yet alert, and though he tries to listen intently the man still manages to surprise him, entering the room so quietly Levi wouldn't

have thought it possible for a man his size. He stops to inspect the floor for a moment, finally giving Levi a small smile of approval before walking over to a heavy wooden desk and pulling a small golden key out of his pocket, unlocking the top-most drawer and starting to rummage through the papers in it, lifting messy stacks and piles on the table top and leaving them where they are after he's found what he has been looking for – a few sheets of paper, official looking with stamps and signatures, and what seems to Levi like a passport. He places them in his pockets before walking up to Levi.

“I know you like things clean,” he starts almost kindly, “so I apologise for what I must ask of you. I need you to help me make a small mess.”

Levi frowns. “What for?”

“It suits our needs to make this place look like someone has left in a hurry,” the Commander explains briefly. “So if you'll follow me upstairs, please. Also, if you had a house like this, where would you keep your suitcases?”

Levi rolls his eyes as he leads the man out of the library and walks straight to the closet in the entrance hall, pulling out two suitcases of stiff brown leather which the Commander accepts gratefully. They ascend the stairs to the second floor and enter a bedroom, where the man starts going through drawers and wardrobes, throwing out clothes for Levi to put unfolded into the bags. He leaves several items lying around as he continues to the dresser and into the bathroom, grabbing an odd selection of things, a comb and a razor, an old pocket watch and a tie pin, a pair of boots and dress shoes.

“That's it,” Levi finally says, struggling to close the second bag. “These are both full.”

“And ahead of schedule as well,” the Commander replies, looking at his watch.

They walk back into the library where the man falls into the armchair again, throwing one of his legs over the other and leaning back tiredly. Levi takes a seat on the edge of one of the heavy leather sofas, watching the man as he lets out the air in his lungs in one long sigh.

“Long day?” Levi asks.

The man turns to look at Levi like suddenly remembering his presence before saying, “Yes, it's been rather long.”

They both fall quiet as the man glances at his watch again and Levi wonders what they're waiting for but doesn't feel like asking the question out loud. The Commander seems relaxed and as he watches him Levi can feel the adrenaline leaving his limbs and the effects of the long walk taking its place. He yawns widely, drawing the man's attention.

“I feel I ought to make an apology,” the Commander suddenly breaks the silence, his expression serious again. “For my words when we last met.”

Levi frowns again but doesn't speak, feeling like he'd rather the man hadn't brought it up; that sting of embarrassment burns on his cheeks.

“I stand behind what I said,” the man goes on. “You shouldn’t have come to my apartment uninvited. It’s hardly safe for either one of us, not to mention that you acted against my direct orders. But I must admit that my insulting your intelligence was both unnecessary and unkind, and for that I do apologise.”

Levi stays quiet for a long while looking for words that aren’t there, words that would express any of that confusion at being spoken to like this. He can feel the Commander’s eyes on him but can’t look up, fearing the man’s face is full of that solemnity that makes all the things he says so significant to him.

“I shouldn’t have come there,” Levi admits, keeping his eyes on the floor. “I just couldn’t sleep thinking about how shitty your toilet has gotten.”

The Commander sighs. “And there’s that again,” he says under his breath before the sound of a car pulling up by the house sends him to his feet. “That’s us.”

Levi jumps up from the sofa as the man grabs the suitcases and exits the house, placing the bags into the trunk of a sleek, black car before climbing into the back seat. Levi follows him a touch hesitantly; as soon as he closes the door the vehicle jumps into motion, speeding down the street. The driver and the Commander exchange a few sentences in English before they all fall silent. Levi can feel the exhaustion seeping into his body as he leans drowsily against the window, until the Commander pulls him further into the car by his arm.

“Someone might see you,” he simply explains.

Levi tilts his head back and falls asleep, waking up when someone shakes him gently by his shoulder, his cheek pressed firmly against the Commander’s arm. He starts up and looks out of the window at the Frauenkirche.

“I’m afraid we can’t take you further,” the Commander says, sounding apologetic. “Will you get home from here?”

Levi frowns. “I’m not a fucking idiot,” he barely replies as he climbs out of the car.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- implied rape
- foul language
- death/murder

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I was doing the re-writes and this one kind of got away from me. I'm pretty happy with the result though. The next deadline I've set for myself falls on October 23rd. Hope you'll enjoy the chapter!

Ps: Resisting the urge to make Erwin's alias Sturmbannführer Schön was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi spends the weekend indoors with Farlan and Isabel, reliving the mission in his early morning dreams from which Farlan wakes him softly, asking whether he was having a nightmare since his breathing was so restless and shallow. They're not nightmares, at least Levi doesn't think so, but they're vivid and unpredictable, sometimes ending with Levi in his own apartment and sometimes with him in the Commander's. All things considered Levi is surprised to find himself in such good humour, even having enough patience to practice French with Farlan and Isabel, though they both stop to laugh at his accent every time he gets a sentence out.

On Monday Isabel makes her usual visit to Herr Schild's, coming back for lunch with the morning's newspaper tucked under her arm. She grabs the scissors, but Farlan snatches the daily out of her hands.

"I'd like to read it this time," he tells her kindly, "before you cut holes in it."

Levi and Isabel share a look; Farlan hasn't read the paper in ages, having stopped some years ago saying the papers never printed anything but bad news by which he meant news about the German army's victories. Levi still remembers the days when Farlan used to read through the lists of the fallen, eyes anxiously looking for a familiar name which, in the end, he never found. That was before Isabel came to live with them, before that day when she stopped Levi at a street corner near the train station and asked him for money so she could buy herself some bread. Levi asked her where her parents were then, reading her obstinate silence to mean she was on her own, just like he had been so many years before.

Even now he can't say he consciously decided to take her in, but somehow a warm meal and safe place to sleep for a night or two turned into a permanent solution. With her still refusing

to tell them anything of substance about her family and where she comes from, returning her to her people is something Levi's given up on years ago. They don't know much more about her today than they did when they first met, just odd pieces of information she lets slip every once in a while, and things Levi and Farlan have noticed: her strange, accented German that neither one of them can place, the way she flinches at loud noises, and her age, which she says she doesn't know but which by Levi and Farlan's careful estimate can't be more than fifteen, making her some ten years younger than either one of them. It's not a question of trust, her not telling them about her past, or at least Levi doesn't think so; some things are just too painful for her to talk about, even with them.

"But you never read the paper, big brother," she says as Farlan spreads the front page out on the kitchen table.

Farlan shrugs with a smile, peering down at the headlines. Levi stirs a pot full of soup on the stove, glancing over the man's shoulder at the words on the page, reading through them much more slowly than Farlan so he's always only halfway done with the texts by the time the man turns the page, but he doesn't mind until a photo catches his eye and he grabs Farlan's arm to read the short column of text below it. The man in the picture is familiar, Levi recognises the greying hair and that bony face; the article about him is short, just a mention that he's gone missing and a plea for the public to call in any sightings of him. Levi hasn't considered it before but it makes sense they wouldn't want to advertise a thing like that. As he looks at the photo Levi absently wonders whether there's something he ought to be feeling – guilt, perhaps, or regret – but in all honesty he feels no different than before. But then, it wasn't Levi who did the actual killing.

"Rats leaving a sinking ship," he thinks to mutter, just because being in such a good mood makes him hopeful, and because Farlan is finally reading the paper again. He turns the page for the other man who looks at him, raising an eyebrow.

"D'you think?" he asks and Levi grunts, stirring the soup slowly.

After lunch Levi leaves the apartment to get their rations, fighting to keep his patience in the Monday throng as he waits for his share of what the shop keep has managed to acquire for the day. Before getting back into the apartment, he stops in the communal bathroom to take a shit, and as he sits down on the toilet seat a folded piece of paper falls out of his pocket on the dingy tiled floor. He picks it up instantly, the pencilled words are just as neat and plain as before: *Apartment, Monday, 16:00*.

"Quit fucking following me everywhere," he mutters under his breath as he crumples up the note and drops it in the toilet before wiping his arse and flushing. He looks at himself in the mirror as he washes his hands, running his fingers tentatively through his hair before rolling his eyes and walking out.

The next day as he's making his way through the city, his usual route feels somehow shorter as he crosses the Augustus Bridge and passes the church, walking along the riverbank for a stretch, watching the trees swaying in the summer breeze. When he gets to the building he

enters swiftly, jumping up the stairs two at a time until a stern voice speaks out and stops him in his tracks.

“Hey you!”

Levi turns around reluctantly to face the speaker, an old lady with steely grey hair and an expression that says she doesn’t like the look of Levi. “Who are you? What are you doing here?”

Levi pulls his hands out of his pockets, faking that polite smile that he’s taken so much care to learn. “My name is Lukas. I’m the new housekeeper for Herr Holtz.”

The old lady’s eyes narrow. “You mean Sturmbannführer Holtz, surely,” she says and Levi cringes internally.

“Yes, the Sturmbannführer. Of course.”

“Why would Herr Sturmbannführer hire a man as his housekeeper? Surely there are plenty of young ladies in this city looking for such work.”

Levi shrugs. “You’ll have to ask Herr Sturmbannführer, won’t you?” he says, fighting to keep the tone of his voice neutral. “Anyway, the dirt doesn’t care if I’m a man. It’ll get clean all the same.”

“I suppose,” the old lady replies slowly, clutching her handbag like fearing Levi might snatch it from her hands. “I’ll have to remember to ask him when next I see him.”

“You do that,” Levi tells her. “Well, I mustn’t keep the honourable Herr Sturmbannführer waiting, so if you’ll excuse me.”

He climbs the rest of the stairs up to the door and knocks loudly enough for the old lady to hear; she hasn’t moved from her place and Levi can sense her peering up at him, like expecting the Commander to show up at the door without a clue who Levi is, proving her suspicions. When the man finally does greet Levi, his manner is as polite as ever and he lets Levi in without hesitation, nodding a hello to his neighbour before closing the door.

“Nosy old hag,” Levi huffs in irritation without greeting the man further. “She should learn to mind her own fucking business.”

“I’m sorry she bothered you,” the Commander says, walking ahead of Levi into the sitting room. “Tea?” he asks as casually as before, and Levi grunts a confirmation.

He walks around the room as the man gets busy in the kitchen, looking over the bookshelf and running his finger along it, frowning and crinkling his nose as it comes back covered in dust. The floor has gone a greyish brown from muddy boot prints and the dirt the Commander has carried in from outside has rubbed into the rugs as well. Levi’s gaze travels up and he isn’t surprised to see a cobweb in the corner.

“Have you cleaned in here at all?” Levi asks the man sternly as he enters with the tray. “This place is a fucking shit hole. I’ve seen animals that are cleaner than you.”

The Commander looks up at him, expression shifting between amused and exasperated. “Don’t you think you’re overreacting a little?” he asks Levi who sits down, throwing one of his legs over the other.

“What are you, fucking blind?” Levi snaps back at him. “I should probably steer clear of your bathroom. I bet you’ve got shit stains the size of my fist in your toilet.”

The Commander, who has just been about to take a sip of his tea, lays his cup back down on the coffee table and sighs audibly. “I have a feeling someone with an interest in psychoanalysis could probably write a whole thesis on you,” he replies almost sullenly as Levi sneers into his drink.

“Are you saying you haven’t taken a dump in your own toilet in a month?” Levi asks the man. “You might want to see a doctor about that. You can die from constipation that bad.”

“As unnecessary as I find this subject,” the Commander says tiredly, “I’m glad my message reached you. I can’t deny the place could use some cleaning, though I feel I ought to tell you right away there is some other business I asked you here for.”

“What sort of business?” Levi asks with a frown. “You’re not planning on slicing up another Nazi in here, are you?”

The Commander shakes his head. “Not today,” he replies without smiling. “There are some matters we need to discuss, but I’m afraid I haven’t the time at present. First I have some errands to run and later there’s a function I need to attend. Not to mention we really should wait for the others.”

“You mean that American giant and the other one?”

“Yes. But as I said, I’d rather wait before getting any further into it,” the man explains, picking up his cup of tea again and taking a sip. “I trust I can leave you alone in here for the afternoon and evening.”

Levi clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “If you still think I’m here to steal your worthless junk...” he says without bothering to finish the sentence.

“I was more concerned you’d get in trouble with the neighbours, but I suspect you’ll manage.”

“I can be really polite if I want to,” Levi assures the man, who raises one of those thick eyebrows.

“To be sure,” he replies. “I suppose you don’t exactly feel the pressure to pretend around me then?”

Levi looks at him with a frown for a moment. “I guess not,” he finally says. “I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“Well, far be it from me to convince you otherwise.” The Commander says, emptying his teacup before standing up swiftly, looking down at Levi in a way that makes his skin itch.

“I’ll be back in a few hours. I’m sure I don’t need to instruct you on your tasks.”

Levi sneers again. “Like a cat teaching a fish to swim,” he mutters into his tea, making the man clear his throat.

“Yes, I suppose that comparison is accurate enough,” he agrees tiredly before leaving the apartment.

As soon as he’s finished his tea, Levi gets to work. He dusts the furniture and brushes out the dry dirt in the rugs before sweeping and scrubbing the floors and clearing the cobwebs from the ceiling, standing on a chair to reach them with his duster. He opens the windows and cleans the kitchen before marching into the bedroom, the only place in the apartment that is properly aired, the window being open, as usual. He pulls the covers off the bed and changes the sheets; the linen closet has the same faint smell of lavender as the bathroom cupboard that houses the towels. Levi absently wonders whether the Commander has been doing his own laundry until now or whether he’s had someone do it for him; perhaps knowing he has Levi to rely on has made the man lazy and neglectful of basic cleanliness.

By the time the Commander returns Levi has moved on to the bathroom where he’s scrubbed the toilet – which really wasn’t as bad as he thought it’d be – before attacking the tub with soap and a sprinkle of salt and a brush. As soon as he hears the door closing Levi rushes to poke his head out into the hallway.

“Wipe your feet,” he commands sternly. “I just finished scrubbing the floors so you’d better not soil them with those shitty boots.”

The man makes no reply but wipes the soles of his shoes carefully on the doormat. He’s carrying several large paper bags in his hands and Levi leaves the bathroom to help him carry them into the kitchen where the Commander starts emptying them onto the table; they all contain food.

“I won’t be dining in today,” he tells Levi who has started lifting the items into the pantry or the icebox. “You should feel free to cook whatever you’d like for yourself. You can take the rest of the food with you when you leave.”

Levi weighs a piece of beef absently in his hand – no less than half a kilo of quality meat, that – before placing it in the cooler. With the carrots and onions the man has brought it’ll make a fine stew. He looks at the rest of the selection: apples, dried peas, a bag of flour, tinned peaches and beans, two loaves of bread and a lump of butter, near a dozen eggs and a bottle of milk, a chunk of cheese, a small bag of sugar and a sealed tin box of the same tea the man has in his cupboard.

“All of it?” he asks incredulously and the Commander nods.

“I’m afraid I have no money to give you this time,” he explains, “but I’ll make sure to have some on Thursday. I trust twice a week is regular enough for you?”

Levi stares at the man wordlessly for a while before finally nodding.

“Good. I suppose that’s settled then,” the man says with a smile. “Are you done cleaning? I need to have a bath.”

“No, I’m... The tub isn’t clean yet,” Levi responds, his words faltering. “I’ll go and finish that now.”

He leaves the room hurriedly, wondering what has brought on this sudden change of heart as he finishes cleaning. After all, it’s hardly been two weeks since the Commander told him he couldn’t guarantee any kind of regularity as far as Levi’s schedule is concerned, and now he can manage having Levi over twice a week. As he rinses down the bathtub, Levi debates asking the man, but when he walks in, the words get stuck in his throat.

“I’d appreciate it if you could get an outfit ready for me while I bathe,” the Commander tells him. “Just a standard uniform will do, with a clean shirt, which you really ought to iron as well.”

Levi stares at the man blankly. “You haven’t ironed the shirts I washed?” he asks impassively. “It’s been a month.”

“And thankfully, I haven’t had need for them until now,” the Commander says with a smile. “Given your superior ironing skills I’d say it’s a lucky occurrence.”

Levi rolls his eyes. “You should’ve ironed them when they were damp,” he explains, like to a child. “I’ll never get all the wrinkles and creases out now.”

“I’m sure no one will be looking at me that closely,” the Commander replies as Levi exits the room.

No doubt the man has been sending out his laundry before now; his shirts, as far as Levi has seen them, have always been immaculately clean and crisp and clearly there is no way the Commander could have managed that himself. Levi fetches the iron and the ironing board from the pantry before finding and laying out the Commander’s clothes and getting the shirts from the wardrobe; the starch has set the wrinkles, just as Levi feared and he waits for the iron to get very warm before even attempting smoothing them out. By the time Levi’s done, the Commander has finished bathing and is looking at himself in a mirror placed on the inside of one of the doors of his wardrobe; he’s wearing trousers and a white undershirt and Levi finds the sight of his large bare feet strange, having never seen him without those boots on.

To Levi this feels like the most relaxed he’s ever seen the Commander, and something about it makes him feel uneasy; he’s always thought there is something strange about seeing people in their homes without shoes on, like somehow it means you’re not strangers anymore, like you’ve made that leap to something more familiar than mere acquaintances. Levi thinks absently how strange it is that such a simple thing can change a perception so much, how by just removing those grotesque army boots the Commander has become a human instead of a soldier. He realises only now that he’s never seen the man without at least one item of military clothing on, and he wonders how much more human the Commander could get

wearing regular slacks and work shoes, or even a simple suit. His eyes are still fixed on those large feet and he only thinks to look up when the man clears his throat and though Levi isn't sure the sound is meant to signal something to him, he hurries to hold out one of the ironed shirts, getting on tiptoes to help it on to his broad shoulders as the man stares at him through the mirror.

"You should use less starch next time," the Commander says absently as he buttons up.

Levi clicks his tongue. "You should shut your mouth," he replies, running a hand across the shirt's right arm to smooth it out, feeling the firm muscles under his fingers. "It's because you didn't iron the shirts when they were damp. I told you."

The Commander's reflection smiles at his indignation. "How did you get so impudent?" he asks, only half-serious, as Levi gets his uniform jacket off the hanger.

"How did you get so fucking obnoxious?" he asks the man back, making him cough out a laugh.

"Does that mouth of yours get you into a lot of trouble then?"

Levi looks at the man through the mirror, keeping his face expressionless. "Not really," he replies. "I only talk like this to you."

The Commander nods understandingly as he pushes his arms into the sleeves of the jacket. "I guess that's a relief of sorts," he muses quietly, sitting down on the bed to pull on his socks. "I'm afraid I won't be back until late, and I know the others won't arrive until midnight at the earliest. If you feel it'll be too late for you to walk back at night you're welcome to sleep on the sofa. Unless you're afraid someone will worry about your whereabouts."

"I don't mind walking around at night," Levi tells him. "It's not any more dangerous for someone like me than walking around at any other time of the day."

The Commander agrees, perfecting that hideous outfit with the hat he places on that neatly combed blond hair. Looking at him, Levi can't help the shivers shooting out across his body, and he screws up his face. He leaves the room without a word to get started on dinner; the Commander has left by the time he's finished chopping up the meat. He fries it on a skillet with carrots and onions, placing all of the ingredients in a pot filled halfway with water and shoves the whole thing in the oven.

The hours Levi spends alone in the Commander's apartment are calm and grounding, like a glimpse to what life could be; he waits for the dinner to cook and makes himself another cup of tea with a thick slice of buttered bread while the scent of the stew fills the rooms, salty, earthy and delicious. The evening sun falls through the sitting room windows in those shades of blood-tinted orange as Levi goes around the home, looking into cupboards and closets and drawers, making a list of things that need doing and spots that need cleaning and organising. He makes a mental note to himself of the quantities of the Commander's possessions: how many pairs of socks, how many shirts, how many towels and sheets the man owns so he'll

know if clothes and things are dirty or missing. He looks through the secretaire again – the fragment of the letter has disappeared – though it makes him none the wiser about its contents.

After dinner he lies down on the sofa and falls asleep, waking only when the Commander returns and closes the door loudly behind himself. He walks into the sitting room and places his hat and uniform jacket on the chair by the secretaire before looking suddenly up at Levi.

“I hope I didn’t wake you,” he says quietly, taking in Levi’s sleep-ruffled hair.

Levi shrugs. “I’d slept long enough,” he replies, sitting up and throwing one his legs over the other.

The Commander crosses the room and sinks into an armchair, undoing two of the topmost buttons on his collar shirt and removing the cufflinks on his sleeves; he drops them on a side table and pulls off his boots before stretching his feet and leaning back, letting out a long, exhausted sigh.

“Long night?” Levi asks and the man groans audibly.

“Another three hours of Wagner and I’ll be quite ready to hang myself,” he tells the ceiling before closing his eyes for a good ten seconds.

He pulls out a slim silver cigarette case and picks one out, lighting it before taking a long drag, letting the smoke escape through his nose as he turns his gaze back on Levi, who has stopped to stare at the man’s feet again, covered only by those black dress socks.

“I saw that man in the paper this morning,” Levi says. “Do they think he’s left the country?”

The Commander smokes quietly for a moment. “They’re not really sure what to think yet,” he admits quietly. “You’ll hardly be the first person they’ll suspect, so you shouldn’t worry about it.”

“Right,” Levi mutters.

“Unless you feel remorseful. Or guilty, perhaps?” the man asks and Levi hurries to shake his head.

“Do you?” he asks back; the Commander takes longer to reply than he has thought.

“I don’t enjoy it,” he finally explains tiredly. “If I did I’d be no better than them. But I have never refused to carry out an order or an act that I felt was just and necessary for the survival of what’s good in mankind. For the sake of that I don’t mind compromising my own morals.”

“And how do you know they’re not good for mankind?” Levi asks now without really understanding why if not to squeeze out another little droplet of information about the man. “How do you know the Nazis haven’t been right about all of it?”

The Commander’s expression grows serious and when he speaks his voice is filled with such contempt Levi can’t help staring, eyes wide with surprise.

“There can be no justification for what they do,” the man barely says and falls quiet with Levi still speechless from the sudden outburst of emotion. For a moment he wonders what sort of things the Commander must have seen, even as a useless pencil pusher, and he feels conflicted, though he’s not sure why. Something in the man’s face seems to break, like he’s letting go of things that can’t be helped, and he sighs again, smoking his cigarette. “I’m afraid I’ve been terribly rude,” he says suddenly, offering Levi the slim silver case. “Would you like one?”

Levi scoffs. “The day I want to soil my lungs with that shit is the day you can throw me in the madhouse,” he states sullenly and the Commander utters a laugh.

“I had a feeling you weren’t the smoking type,” he says, casting the burnt tip of his cigarette into an ashtray.

There’s a light knock on the door that sends the Commander to his feet; when he returns he’s accompanied by those two men, the unnervingly tall American and Officer High-and-Mighty, dressed again in full regimentals with a golden swastika pinned to the lapel of his jacket. He squints at Levi unpleasantly as he walks past and sits down on the other end of the sofa. The American takes a seat in the other armchair, sniffs at the air in the room for a few seconds and smiles to himself; Levi can’t help but look at him, frowning, and question the whole operation and the Commander’s sanity for resting any part of the effort on these two.

“So what’s all this about then?” he asks sullenly as the Commander takes his previous seat opposite of Levi and puts out his cigarette. “I thought I just do the clean-up.”

“That’s one thing too many, if you ask me,” the man in uniform says. “I’m sorry, but I will not hide how I feel about including him in this, Erwin. He has no military background, no qualifications whatsoever... You know central is not happy with you either.”

Levi frowns at the address as the Commander leans back in his chair.

“I assumed you’d reported it,” he says calmly as the other man flushes with anger.

“You’re damned right I did,” he replies heatedly, “and quite frankly I’m appalled that you didn’t. Your lack of regard for protocol—”

“Central has always valued my ability to adapt to situations much more than my rigorously following protocol,” the Commander cuts in sternly. “Anyway, the damage is done, so to speak. There’s really no more need to get into it. Unless you object, Mike?”

The American shrugs and sniffs. “Is he any good?” he asks, sounding almost indifferent.

“Very,” the Commander replies without looking at Levi, who’s starting to feel a sting of irritation at being talked about as if he’s not in the room.

“You know that’s all I care about,” the man says. “As far as I’m concerned he’s an asset now.”

“Oi,” Levi interrupts as the man in uniform is about to open his mouth. “I’m sitting right here you blind fucks. I really don’t understand why any of you would have a problem with me cleaning up the messes you make but if you do you can take it up with me.”

“I’ve said this before and I’ll say it again, Erwin, you had no right to make that call on your own. Not when it puts us all at risk,” the officer says without paying any mind to Levi’s words. “You knew nothing about this man so can you please explain to me in a way that I can understand what in the world possessed you to make him a part of this?”

The Commander’s eyes go from the man to Levi and he looks at him for a long time in a way that makes Levi’s skin itch before finally saying, “Intuition,” and nothing else besides.

The man stares at the Commander for a while in utter silence. “Intuition?” he repeats incredulously. “That’s all you have to say for yourself? You made your decision based on intuition?”

The Commander nods sternly. “I limited contact while you did your part, did I not? And now that you have, can you say my assessment was incorrect?” he asks; the impassiveness of his tone reminds Levi of when they first met, and he realises only now how different the Commander’s behaviour towards him has become.

The man falls quiet with a sour look on his face. “You know there are concerns,” he finally says, making the American frown.

“What kind of concerns?” he asks; a flicker of triumph passes across the officer’s features.

“Oi,” Levi cuts in again, his temper flaring. The only thing he’s really managed to take away from the exchange is that everyone is talking about him as if he were a problem to be solved, and being in the dark about the rest has made him uneasy. “Could one of you idiots tell me what the problem is so I won’t have to sit here with my thumb up my arse all night?”

The man in uniform turns to him and pulls a slip of paper out of his breast pocket, handing it to Levi without a word. An address has been written on it neatly with a fountain pen; the handwriting is different from the notes Levi was given before, but to his surprise he recognises the address, knows it all too well.

“You’ve been seen frequenting this address,” the officer tells him, his tone serious. “Why?”

Levi feels anger rising in him, the sort of terrible anger that makes his hands eerily steady and his voice unusually quiet. “I figured someone was following me,” he says, “but this is too fucking much.”

“Answer the question,” the officer says. “Why have you been going to this address?”

“None of your fucking business,” Levi responds, his words coming out as smooth and quiet as before, turning toward the Commander. “Did you know about this?”

The man nods, but before he has a chance to speak Levi has cut in.

“Clearly my life is none of your business,” he says bitterly. “You lying piece of shit.”

A hint of a frown appears on the Commander's face, the first expression he's had since the two men entered. "Please, calm down," he says. "I can explain if you'll just--"

"It's not you who should be doing the explaining, Erwin," the man in the uniform interrupts, turning back to Levi. "The man who lives at this address used to hold a position at the SS headquarters in Berlin. Were you aware of that?"

Levi says nothing, simply stares at the Commander with an expression on his face he's sure is nothing short of utter disgust. He's felt uneasy about being followed, felt a shiver shooting down his spine whenever one of those cryptic little notes has suddenly appeared in his pocket when he's been going about his business, has agonised over the realisation that these people know where he lives and most likely with whom, but he was willing to put all that aside to be a part of this, to do something with what is left of his life. This, however, bringing up Krieger, asking Levi about him, acting as though he goes to him voluntarily and to do what exactly? To tell him he's helping a group of spies by mopping up after the Nazis they kill? The Commander's words are stinging his mind: 'Your private life is none of my concern', 'I reckon that's your business', 'The less I know about it the better'.

"See?" the man in uniform says suddenly. "He refuses to tell us, thus admitting he's guilty. I hope you're prepared to handle this, Erwin, since you're the one who brought him on."

The Commander glares at the man, his features immobile, before saying, "If he were a threat we'd all be dead by now, including him."

"Are you basing that assessment on intuition as well?"

"I know it from personal experience," the Commander goes on. "You know as well as I do that they don't take their time to wait things out."

The man in uniform seems to hesitate for a moment. "They could be trying to find out how far this operation goes," he counters, but even the American shakes his head.

"Even with this amount of information they'd have all three of us," he says. "They'd know at least one of us would spill it during interrogations."

"They'd never risk the information getting out," the Commander adds. "They'd want to eradicate the problem as quickly as possible. It's been nearly two months."

"It still doesn't explain why he's been going to that apartment," the man says now, grasping at straws it seems. "If his reasons are so innocent then why won't he simply reveal them?"

"Because it doesn't concern you," the Commander replies before Levi has a chance to tell the man to go eat shit and die. "It doesn't concern any of us. Or are you really saying you never make visits you'd rather not divulge to Mike and myself?"

The officer blushes furiously and grits his teeth for a moment before feigning indifference and shrugging. "Fine," he says sourly, "but if the time ever comes, don't say I didn't warn you."

The Commander turns to Levi again, wearing the same frown as before. "I'd like to offer my sincerest apologies," he starts, "for what I'm sure must feel like a breach of trust."

"It was a routine background check," the man in uniform cuts in. "You shouldn't be apologising for that, Erwin. Only an idiot would have assumed we wouldn't have him followed."

The Commander pays no mind to the man but keeps his eyes on Levi. "Assessing whether you're a potential threat was necessary and I won't pretend otherwise, even though I personally didn't share many of the concerns of my comrades. I did my best not to lie to you openly and as far as my statements about your personal life go, I don't consider having done so. However, I can see that you feel differently and I apologise for my actions due to that."

Levi squints as he looks at the man who seems as honest as ever and Levi wonders if that's why he's trusted this man so easily, because he doesn't seem to be in such denial about himself and not above admitting his own mistakes, which Levi finds to be a rare quality in people. He remembers the Commander's words about how the two of them are similar, quick to judge situations accurately and good at observing people and assessing their characters. Is that why the man is not concerned about Levi? Is that why Levi has never until now doubted the Commander, because they've both read each other as non-threatening? And there's that way of apologising the man has that makes Levi feel uneasy, though he's not sure why.

"Though making sure you weren't passing along information about the operation to the enemy was our main concern," the Commander goes on, "we also had to assess whether you're considered a person of interest to the establishment. We found the name Theodore Mertz on a list of people the Gestapo are tracking down, so I'd advise you to destroy the false documents bearing that name as soon as possible if you've not already done so. We have people working on the rest."

"What does that mean?" Levi asks, his breath nearly catching in his throat.

"It means we're working on it," the man in uniform cuts in, "and that's all you need to know."

Levi glances at the man and nods in his direction. "So who's he? Another shitbumführer like you?"

The officer looks at the Commander pointedly. "Charming," he drawls sarcastically. "Maybe you could make your next pet a more sophisticated one? Like a pigeon, or a sewer rat perhaps."

"It seems all anyone needs to know about your level of sophistication was exhibited in that very sentence, Darlett," the Commander replies humourlessly, making Levi suppress a scoff.

"Quit it, you two," the American speaks up and the Commander straightens his posture in his chair.

"Sorry, Mike," he says and turns to Levi again, nodding toward the American. "This is Mike Zacharius, and he's Flagon Darlett—"

“Major Flagon Darlett,” the officer cuts in and Levi rolls his eyes.

“—though he goes by the name Hauptsturmführer Erik Müller.”

“And what about him?” Levi asks, signalling toward the American. “What’s his Nazi name?”

“What I do doesn’t require me to wear any of that skull and bones get up,” the man replies. “Most days, at least.”

“Good,” Levi remarks. “I know four-year-olds who speak better German than you.”

Mike laughs quietly and says something to the Commander in their language; the blond man seems to agree and replies, the words pouring out round and smooth and foreign, and Levi feels goose bumps rising on his arms.

“Are you keeping me here all night just so I can listen to the three of you arguing,” Levi asks sullenly, crossing his arms over his chest, “or is there an actual reason I’m here?”

“Yes,” the Commander says. “I wanted to ask for your assistance regarding an urgent matter—”

“You’re not seriously still planning that operation are you, Erwin?” Darlett interrupts again. “I’ve told you countless times, it’s nothing short of a suicide mission.”

“I believe it’s entirely reasonable to assume the mission to have every chance of success and furthermore, the value of the information we can potentially gain outweighs the risks involved,” the Commander explains patiently. “But our chances would improve significantly with your help.”

“This isn’t simple clean-up,” Levi guesses and the Commander shakes his head.

“I was hoping to utilise your skills in disguise this time,” the man says. “With your permission, of course.”

“Of course,” Levi replies in a lazy drawl. “So what’s the job?”

“There’s an important document I need to see,” the Commander tells him, “but I’m finding it difficult to access. It’s located at the office of Generalleutnant Osterhaus in one of the barracks in the Albertstadt.”

Levi feels his breath catch in his throat. “The Albertstadt?”

“Yes, I know how it must sound,” the man replies, sounding apologetic. “I am aware that it’s the largest military centre of the region and probably the last place you’d like to find yourself in. I would undertake this mission myself, but I’m afraid my presence there would raise too many questions.”

“Why?” Levi asks the man now, frowning at the hint of embarrassment on his face.

“Suffice it to say my relationship with Generalleutnant Osterhaus leaves something to be desired.”

Darlett sneers loudly. “Now there’s an understatement,” he snarls unpleasantly. “I told you, Erwin, you should never have asked him to pay you back for that dinner. I told you he would take offence, but did you listen?”

“I remain of the opinion that it was necessary to keep my cover,” the Commander voices calmly. “After all, I have a reputation to maintain.”

“As the biggest cheapskate in the Reich,” Darlett finishes for him with a scoff. “I find it hard to determine how much of that was about maintaining your cover and how much about you missing all that money.”

“Be that as it may,” the Commander says, turning back to Levi, “your unfortunate task would be to locate and enter the office and bring me the documents in question. Under a suitable disguise, of course.”

“So you want me to steal them for you?” Levi asks, and the man shakes his head again.

“All I need is to see the documents,” the Commander says. “Your job would simply be to find them and bring them to me in a nearby location and then take them back exactly where you found them.”

“And to walk in and out of a military facility twice,” Levi reminds him. “What’s so important about these papers anyway?”

“The documents in question contain classified information that would provide the Allied forces with significant advantages in their efforts against the German air force.”

Levi can’t help one of his eyebrows nudging upwards.

“Obviously the risks are considerable,” the Commander goes on. “The building will be full of military personnel, which means there is no way to ensure your safety during the mission, but I recall you saying something about the possibility of dying not being a foreign concept to you.”

Levi takes a moment to consider the Commander’s words. “So what good will it do for you to see the papers?” he finally asks. “Do you expect me to sit there for an hour while you memorise them with half of the German army after me?”

“I have estimated it will take me approximately six minutes to memorise the twelve pages in question,” the man replies matter-of-factly, making Levi frown while Darlett sighs audibly. “My memory works much like a camera. Every sight is imprinted into my mind in minutest detail.”

“Yes, your incredible mental faculties are a marvel,” Darlett comments. “I still think that considering the risks the mission simply isn’t worth it. If anyone were to utilise that information it would immediately be known which office the leak came from and that would

put you under enormous pressure, Erwin. The war will come to an end regardless of what's in those documents."

"Bringing the war to a close as quickly as possible to prevent further civilian casualties is of the utmost importance," the Commander counters solemnly. "Despite recent development the outcome of the war is by no means set in stone. Germany could yet surprise us."

"Wait," Levi interrupts, confused. "We're losing the war?"

The three men in the room all turn to look at him as if he's just said something outlandish; the Commander's eyes have something akin to pity in them as he looks at Levi.

"The German army's advancement has ceased a long time ago," he explains calmly. "With the Red Army closing in from the east and with the success of the landings of the Allied troops in Normandy most people agree it's only a matter of time now."

"It's a numbers game at this point," the American says, "and you don't have them."

"But the landings failed," Levi insists despite the nagging doubt growing in the back of his mind. "They said so on the radio. The landing troops were all beaten."

"I doubt you've heard a single piece of news that's truthful since before Stalingrad," the Commander says, his voice full of careful compassion. "Though Hitler will draw out this war for as long as he possibly can, make no mistake."

Levi's mind is reeling as the words sink in. The victories in the early days were so spectacular and the self-aggrandisement so pervasive that for years Levi hasn't been able to imagine any other end to it than the thousand-year Reich of Hitler's speeches stretching over Europe, every last corner of it *Judenfrei*, free of Jews, and that yearning to escape suddenly fills him and makes him shiver. For a moment he can't help but doubt the Commander's words, but as he looks at the man's face, heavy brows drawn over blue eyes, lips pressed together, his whole face benevolent and serious, he knows. Like due to some intuition he never knew he had, he's filled with an exhilarating certainty: there is to be no victory for the Nazis.

Levi feels his breath coming in fast and shallow as his mind struggles to determine whether he should feel like laughing or crying, finally settling for a stunned excitement fuddled by astonishment. Absently he remembers what he said to Farlan about that man in the paper: 'rats leaving a sinking ship', but he never realised how close to being believable that lie of his was. To Levi it's as if the whole world has suddenly opened up, like what he could expect the span of his life to be has doubled in a few minutes and he finds himself thinking about all those German soldiers whose lives now must end prematurely to make the Commander's words a reality.

"It serves us right to lose," Levi says, and no one seems particularly eager to return to the subject.

"If you'd like to take some time to consider—"

“No,” Levi interrupts the Commander sternly as he comes back to the operation. “I’ll do it.”

The faintest smile flashes across the man’s features. “In that case, you have my gratitude,” he says as Darlett sighs again.

“Let me know if you need me then,” he remarks dryly, getting to his feet “though I doubt you’ll have use for more help. After all, you have your little monkey.”

The Commander’s stare is cold as he stands up, and for a strange few seconds Levi wonders whether he’s going to hit Darlett square in the jaw. Instead he walks over to the secretaire, unlocks the topmost drawer and pulls out a brown folder, which he hands to Mike.

“The files from this week,” he says quietly. “Hange will pass them on.”

The American nods curtly, pushing to his feet as well. They exchange a few words in their own language before the two men leave the apartment, leaving Levi alone with the Commander who sinks back down into the armchair.

“I’m sorry to have kept you so long,” he says tiredly, “and I apologise on behalf of Darlett. He—”

“Don’t apologise for him,” Levi cuts in. “It’s not your fault he’s a cunt. You’re not responsible for that.”

The Commander looks at him for a moment without speaking, his expression impenetrable. “I find it distasteful when my guests are insulted under my roof,” he finally says, making Levi frown.

“I thought I was your housekeeper, not your guest,” he reminds the man, who shrugs.

“Can’t you be both?”

“I guess,” Levi replies, frowning as the Commander pulls the cigarette case out of his pocket again. “So, Erwin, eh? Is that your Nazi name or your real name?”

“Both,” the man tells him and scratches fire onto a matchstick. “You should feel free to call me that, unless the situation requires otherwise.”

Levi grunts an agreement of sorts, though he’s not sure how he feels about that. It seems to him they’ve made it work pretty well without any names so far, and for some reason he’s relieved that the Commander doesn’t ask him for his.

“Something you said made me wonder,” Levi tells the man, who looks up with a polite frown. “You said you limited contact while Darlett did his part.”

The Commander nods. “Ah, yes. That,” he says, his voice quiet and pleasant. “Darlett was adamant I should keep you at a distance from the operation while he concluded his investigation of you. Though I don’t feel the need to explain myself, I’d like you to know I didn’t read the file he gave me on you, simply asked if he’d found anything of importance.”

“But you know about who the man is,” Levi points out. “The one I keep going to.”

“As I said before, your connection to him or any other person is no concern of mine,” the Commander hurries to say. “If he’s not a threat to the operation, I need not know about it. Unless you suspect he might start following you.”

Levi considers the question for a moment. It’s true Krieger is easily jealous enough, but Levi knows he’s far too lazy to actually go through the trouble of following Levi himself. As far as having someone do the work for him goes, there’s really no reasonable explanation Levi can think of that the man could give to excuse such a measure.

“No, he won’t follow me,” he says with a certainty that seems to please the Commander.

“Good,” he barely replies. “It’ll remain your private matter then.”

Levi nods absently as the man smokes his cigarette, his shoeless feet pressed against the hardwood floor.

“Anyway, I’m sure you’ll be glad to know there is no need for anyone from our end to keep following you either,” the Commander tells him. “Since I’ll be seeing you twice a week now, I can update you on recent development myself. Though I would like your permission to use your address for emergencies. Strictly life or death situations.”

“I suppose,” Levi agrees reluctantly, his eyes narrowing as he thinks about explaining the Commander’s sudden appearance to Isabel and Farlan. “Don’t make a habit of it though. I don’t need people like you coming in and ruining my reputation.”

The Commander laughs quietly. “Of course not,” he simply says.

After the man has finished his cigarette he helps Levi pack up the food, which weighs heavily on his shoulder as he makes his way through the silent city. When he gets home he finds Isabel and Farlan nodding off at the kitchen table, too tired to scold him properly over having been so late but it’s clear to Levi they’ve been worried about him again. He unpacks all the food to their amazement, leaving the tea and sugar as the final surprise that makes Isabel’s jaw drop so low she can’t help yawning. Seeing how happy it all makes them, Levi wishes he could let them know what he knows, give them that spark of hope that this will all end soon, just like Isabel always says it will.

“The idiot left for some concert and told me not to leave until he got back,” Levi explains briefly. “At least the asshole had the decency to make it up to me.”

“Is this real tea?” Farlan asks, opening the tin box and sticking his nose in, taking a deep breath as a look of euphoria lights up his face. “Who is it that you work for again?”

Levi shakes his head. “No one important. He’s got ties to the black market, that’s all,” he fibs without bothering to worry about how easy it is to lie to Isabel and Farlan these days. He can

feel the other man giving him a long look but saying nothing, perhaps because he'd rather not get into it in front of Isabel.

"Are you going to have a cup of tea with your breakfast, big brother?" the girl asks Levi sleepily as she falls down on her bed and Levi nods.

"You can have one too," he tells her as she pulls the covers on herself.

Farlan seems to sense Levi's exhaustion as they climb between the sheets; for a long time he keeps quiet, glancing at Levi every once in a while until he finally sighs heavily.

"What is it?" he asks, and Farlan flinches at the sudden question. For a moment it seems like he's about to dismiss it but in the end he gets up on his elbow, looking down at Levi.

"It's about the food," he answers, his voice oddly stern. "I was just thinking... Well, there's so much of it."

Levi frowns. "You think we have too much food?" he asks offhandedly, hoping Farlan will leave the subject, but the man rushes to shake his head.

"No, that's not it. I was just wondering..." His words trail off again and it takes an irritated huff from Levi to get him to continue. "I mean, it's not just the food. It's other things, too. Like how you've been acting lately. Or rather, how you've been acting for a long time now, but especially in the past couple of months."

Levi looks at the other man in silence for so long that his stare starts to turn Farlan's resolve into discomfort. He knows what the man is about to say, has sensed it in those uneasy looks; it's that thing between them that they never talk about and Levi can't help but think this is the worst night to bring it up, when he's finally found some relief, a spark of light in the darkness.

"I suppose you're actually going somewhere with this shitty rambling," he says, making no effort to hide his irritation.

Farlan's eyes circle the walls restlessly before coming back to Levi's. "When you stay out all night... Well, I'm not stupid, you know. It's pretty clear what you do, and I don't pretend to know why you have kept at it for as long as you have. You never brought much anything home before, which made me think you had your own reasons, and they're none of my concern. But lately, with the food and everything, it just seems like you're not just doing what you do for yourself. I want you to know I'm not comfortable with you doing that for my sake, and I'm sure Isabel would agree. That's all."

Levi keeps quiet for as long as it takes for Farlan to look at him again. "So you think I'm selling myself to feed you two?" he asks, his voice low and quiet and he can tell the other man grows uneasy due to the sharp tone of it.

"I'm not as naïve as you might think," Farlan tells him defensively. "I know it's the sort of thing that happens and I'm not judging you for it. I just don't want you to do that for my

sake, or Isabel's. We get by just fine on our rations, we don't need the extra food if it means--"

"I'm not letting some Nazi shit fuck me for a few loaves of bread," Levi snaps at the man, who flinches before turning to him defiantly.

"Why are you doing it then?"

Levi falls silent. He can't say Farlan isn't right, there's no point trying to deny his visits to Krieger being what the man knows they are. Farlan having come to the right conclusions doesn't bother Levi and truth be told he's not expected otherwise. It doesn't even bother him that Farlan knows he's a whore – though he finds the term misleading, since whores get paid and from his dealings with Krieger Levi receives absolutely nothing. It takes him a moment to realise that what does bother him is the misinterpretation about the Commander. He takes a moment to consider it, tries to imagine the man like Krieger is but fails; in Levi's mind the two are polar opposites, "I'd like your permission to warn you about threats to your life" against "Your train is waiting, Herr Ackerman". Levi tries to picture the Commander using that considerable strength against him, taking his pleasure from his pain, but the idea is absurd, though somewhere in the back of his mind Levi wonders how someone he has witnessed killing a man in cold blood can seem to him so non-violent.

He turns his focus back on Farlan's question, though he'd rather leave it be. He wishes there was a reason for his visiting Krieger, wishes he could tell Farlan he's doing it for something much more precious than food, to save those two, his family, to get them to safety. No thought is as painful as this, the knowledge that it's all been for nothing, and even his new found hope for the ending of the war seems too distant, too uncertain, too unsafe.

"It's none of your business," Levi tells the man tiredly. "That's not what the food is for, so you don't have to worry about it."

Farlan's voice is incredulous as he asks, "What is it for then? And why does he give you so much?"

"I'm his housekeeper. I cook, I clean, and I scrub the shit stains out of his underwear," Levi explains briefly. "I don't know why he pays me so well."

Farlan keeps his eyes on Levi for a long time before finally relaxing back onto his pillow. "If you tell me that's not what it's for, then I'll believe you," he says quietly, continuing after a short pause, "You know it's not just you who worries about us, don't you? We care about you, Levi, and neither one of us wants to see you get hurt. I know I don't do as much around here as you two but I want to help, I really do."

"Stop that," Levi scolds the man. "You help me more than you know." He presses his chin against Farlan's hair and breathes deeply, falling asleep surrounded by that scent of soap.

The following evening Levi leaves the apartment under the pretence of having to run an errand for his boss, assuring Farlan and Isabel that he will be back as soon as he can, but

wondering somewhere in the back of his mind whether that's a promise he'll be able to keep. He makes his way toward the city centre and heads north, knowing his nervous feet will cross the three kilometres into Albertstadt in less time than he may hope. He flexes his muscles anxiously, trying to look like he's merely stretching his shoulders as he walks through the warm summer night, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his trousers. He feels naked without his long winter coat, better exposed to the hostile glances and glares of the people around him, though it's impossible to determine to what extent he's imagining them.

He walks toward the wooded area that surrounds the barracks, seeing the limestone walls of the Army Museum of the Wehrmacht light and spotless against the darkness. Following the directions the Commander gave him earlier, Levi follows a footpath deeper into the park, passing by soldiers and civilians and doing his best to look like one of them, simply a young man out for a light evening walk, though his body is tense with the expectation of being stopped and searched at any moment. He keeps from looking around himself as he descends the stairs into a public lavatory, marching straight to the booth furthest from the entrance marked WC. He knocks on the door quietly, relieved when it opens to reveal the Commander, his frame looking even heavier in the confined space. He's wearing a pair of light grey slacks held up by black braces that match his leather shoes, and he's thrown off his jacket, the dark blotches under the arms of his white collar shirt reveal the reason, as does the musty scent of his sweat which Levi prefers to the stench of piss the room is otherwise full of. Levi gives him a look to ask whether they're alone, and the man nods.

"We shouldn't waste any time," he whispers, holding out a bundle of clothes. "You can wear the jacket on top of your shirt as long as you button it up."

"I suppose there's no other way," Levi mutters, looking at the grey fabric and screwing up his face before he kicks off his shoes to remove his trousers, wondering nervously how much trouble the both of them would be in should someone find them like this.

"I understand this is unpleasant for you," the Commander states, his eyes fixed respectfully on a point a full metre above Levi's head. "Had there been an alternative solution I would have given it my full support."

Levi grunts as he yanks the uniform trousers from the man's hands before thrusting his legs into them; the fabric folds under his feet, well over a dozen centimetres too long. Levi gives the man an ugly glare as he buckles a belt to keep the pants from falling down to his ankles.

"Yes, I'm also sorry for that," the Commander says after glancing quickly at Levi. "Your size is very particular, you see, and this is the best I could do on such short notice. You can roll the pant legs into the boots, and as long as you keep your jacket buttoned no one should be able to see how badly they fit from the waist."

"As if this isn't humiliating enough..." Levi mutters under his breath.

He throws his own trousers over one of the Commander's outstretched arms before grabbing the uniform jacket, complete with the correct insignia for whatever rank the man has seen fit to bestow upon him, and pulling it on his white shirt. He stuffs his feet into a pair of standard military boots only a size too large for him as the Commander pulls a hat out of a paper bag that's sitting on the floor behind him. To Levi's relief it's not a peaked cap of an officer, but a

simple low-ranking soldiers' one, though fitting it on his head still makes him shudder. When he looks up he sees the Commander staring at him, his expression sombre.

"Well," he mumbles, "it's not any less fitting than I imagined."

Levi glares at him again briefly before handing over his shoes and tugging at the hem of his jacket to make sure it covers the waist of the trousers. He looks enviously at the Commander's attire, momentarily puzzled by the normalcy of it, thinking back and realising he was right, the man does look more human like this. The questions he has about the Commander, his age, his past, the fragment of a letter, they all burst into his mind at once, but the man guides his attention back to the present by handing him a heavy rectangular package wrapped in brown papers and tied up with string, the name Generalleutnant Osterhaus written neatly in the bottom right hand corner.

"This is your cover," the Commander tells him, his voice serious. "Should anyone ask you what you're doing, you'll tell them you're delivering a package from the SS-Personalhauptamt. Do *not* say it's from me personally, just say it's from the Dresden office."

"SS-Personalhauptamt," Levi repeats quietly, fitting the package under his right arm.

"Your name is SS-Sturmmann Otto Rahmer," the man continues and Levi shudders again. "When you get to the office, leave your hat behind. That'll give you a reason to go back. I'll meet you in St Martin church. If anyone's following you, they'll just think you've gone in to pray."

"Right," Levi says, letting out a nervous laugh. "I guess I can look like the praying type."

"You shouldn't run into too much trouble," the Commander tells him in a voice that Levi supposes is meant to be reassuring. "Osterhaus won't be at his office, he's attending a function tonight. It may also be comforting for you to know that your rank is low enough for no one to have any particular interest in you but the fact you've not been sent to the front yet should tell people you have connections. That should encourage them to leave you be."

"That's one 'should' too many, if you ask me," Levi mutters before exiting the booth.

"Good luck then," the man whispers behind him.

Levi glances at his reflection in the mirror and feels a surge of nausea at the sight. He turns his eyes firmly on the door and takes a deep breath before walking forward, his feet slipping in the boots as he leaves the lavatory and marches up the stone steps. The air in the park, though warm, is fresh and sweet after the sweaty stuffiness of the toilet and Levi stops to take another deep breath and eye his surroundings to see if anyone is paying particular attention to him, like wondering why he would go into the bathroom wearing civilian clothing and come out in a uniform. They don't seem to see him at all, however, the young couples on their promenades, the soldiers walking by in noisy groups; it's as if the attire has made him faceless, nigh invisible. Levi tugs again nervously at the hem of the jacket and adjusts the package under his arm before setting out toward the barracks.

The closer he gets to the buildings, the stronger a particular feeling within him grows; that anxious excitement of his school days when he'd play truant and walk around Berlin, stealing apples from people's gardens, constantly afraid that when he'd turn the next corner he'd run into someone who'd ask him what he was doing – or worse yet his uncle. Some years later he'd get the same experience by simply loitering in parks on a Sunday afternoon, Jewish children having been banned from such public areas by then. There was always that part of him even when he was too young to understand it that craved that feeling, that rebellion against the forceful narrowing of his world. Kenny chastised him severely for it whenever he found out – which wasn't as often as you'd think – reminding Levi to stand with the rest of his people, to find solidarity in oppression Levi supposes was the point.

"Envy thou not the oppressor, and choose none of his ways," he quoted to Levi more than once to receive nothing more than a shaking of his head as a response.

That was just the beginning of the obsession that Levi saw grow with each decree passed, each law written, each new restriction imposed. It seemed the less Jews the Nazis wanted to see, the more like a Jew Kenny was determined to become, first growing a beard, then sidelocks, then wearing a tallit katan under all of his clothes. In the scattering of memories Levi has of the man from before the Nazis came to power, Kenny is often drunk on weekends instead of discussing the Talmud, bringing home strange women instead of rabbis and using newspapers to line his shoes rather than to argue politics. He was certainly more responsible later, but just as headstrong, catching Levi between two opposing regulators for how and where he was supposed to spend his time. Levi didn't thank Kenny for what he was trying to do but rather disagreed with him on every point and spent weekends away from home doing things he was certain the man would disapprove of simply to ignore his glares and snarky comments on Sunday evenings. Still Levi can't say it was a relief when Kenny was taken away for trying to defend the Jewish businesses in the neighbourhood on Kristallnacht, but after everything Levi had lived through by then, managing on his own wasn't the struggle you'd expect either.

Now as he enters the inner courtyard of the barracks, he feels it more strongly than ever before, the nervous resistance like an electric current under his skin. He tries to slow down the breaths escaping his lungs in hasty puffs as he shifts the package, trying to ignore the soldiers going about their business all around him, the officers in their hats, the infantrymen in small groups crossing from one building to the next. Levi looks around himself, like only barely aware of where he is going; his mind is going over the map of the building the Commander showed him before and he knows which door to go in through, which stairs to ascend, which hallways to follow and which office to enter. After crossing the threshold into the building, Levi stops the first person he sees, an officer he judges to be in his early thirties.

"Excuse me, sir," he says, adding a slight stammer to seem like more of a fumbling idiot. "Could you tell me where I could find the office of Generalleutnant Osterhaus? I have a delivery to make."

The man looks down at him in impatient irritation before huffing out a short set of directions and leaving through the open door without giving Levi a second glance.

“And thank you, sir,” he mutters to himself, making his way toward the stair on his left. “Nazi bastard.”

He walks up to the second floor, following the man’s instructions and turning right, keeping a swift pace as he strides along a wide hallway, the polished wooden floor shining under his feet with the light cast by the overhead lamps. The wall to his left is lined with windows while the right hand side is fitted with doors, some bearing names, some words outlining the purpose of the rooms behind them. Levi’s eyes scan the names as he walks past, trying to look like he’s there for a reason – or rather like the reason he’s there is as innocent as delivering a package. He turns a corner, feeling his heart hammering in his chest as the end of the corridor gets closer while the name he’s looking for is nowhere to be seen. When he hears voices further down the hallway he glances back, swallowing arduously and picking up his pace, nearly running past the office, the plaque reading ‘Generalleutnant Osterhaus’ catching his attention at the last second.

Levi slips into the dark room through the door that isn’t locked and turns on the light, knowing his cover is useless if he is caught fumbling in the dark. He walks over to the massive wooden desk and drops the package and his hat on top of it before starting his search for the documents the Commander needs, a standard portrait of Hitler looking out of its frames on the wall behind him. He looks through the ones on the desk first, looking for the correct sender and office of origin as per the man’s specifications, but none of the files is the right one. Levi pulls open the right hand side drawer and finds a pile of manila envelopes, relieved when he sees none of them are sealed. He pulls the papers out one by one before finally finding what he’s been looking for; he pushes them quickly under his jacket, pinning them between his back and the belt that’s doing its best to hold up his trousers. He pushes the drawer shut and prepares to leave just as a knock on the door turns his sigh of relief into a hasty gasp.

The door opens to let in a tall man in a greyish green uniform, dark haired and imitating Hitler’s moustache to a somewhat comical effect, though Levi feels far from laughing, tugging at the hem of his jacket before raising his arm to a clumsy salute. The man looks at him, first surprised and then increasingly irritated. Levi estimates his age at around fifty and something about his face reminds Levi of a neighbour they had back in Berlin, a kind old man who used to come into their shop even after the shunning of Jewish businesses, though the lines and wrinkles on the officer’s face don’t help him look any less menacing.

“What the fuck kind of a salute is that?” he barks at Levi, who straightens his posture despite himself. “Put your arm down before you hurt yourself, you idiot! And explain what you’re doing here before I report you!”

“I was making a delivery,” Levi says, lowering his arm and pointing toward the package. “Sir.”

“All incoming deliveries should be taken to the mail room on the first floor,” the officer snaps at him now. “Who the hell authorised you to come into this office?”

“The delivery is from the SS-Personalhauptamt, sir,” Levi explains, remembering the name of the department like due to some miracle. “They told me to personally make sure it gets to

Generalleutnant Osterhaus' office, sir." Levi can feel his armpits starting to itch with sweat as the man looks at him, eyes narrowing as his lips purse together.

"Who told you to do that?"

Levi's heart seems to skip a beat as he concentrates on fixing his face with an expression equal parts nervousness and confusion, trying to look like he's fighting to remember a name.

"What's the matter with you, soldier? Are you some kind of a half-wit?" the man shouts and Levi flinches again. "What's your name, Sturmmann? Tell me so I can report you!"

Levi's mind races and suddenly he's not pretending to have forgotten, but genuinely can't remember the name the Commander gave him. He can feel his breath hitching in his throat, depriving his brain of the precious oxygen he needs to think, to come up with anything, any name that sounds even halfway German, but the only ones in his mind are Ephraim, Shimon, Mordechai, Yaakov, Avraham.

"I think it was Holtz," he finally blurts out as the man takes another step toward him.

"You think?!" he yells, a blob of spit caught on his lower lip. "Are you such a fucking idiot you don't even know what your name is?!"

"No, sir, what I meant is," Levi starts hastily, his mind caught in a litany of choice swear words, "I think it was Sturmbannführer Holtz who told me to bring the package. Sir."

The man's brows climb toward his hairline, and for a moment he turns to look at the package suspiciously. Levi tries to wipe the sweaty palms of his hands on his trousers without the man noticing but only manages to make the slacks slide down taking the file with them until the sharp curve of Levi's arse is the only thing holding it in place.

"You're telling me," the man says slowly, "that Sturmbannführer Holtz told you to personally deliver that package to the office of Generalleutnant Osterhaus?"

"Yes," Levi confirms, "I think it was Sturmbannführer Holtz. Sir."

The officer walks over to the desk to peer down at the name written neatly on the brown wrapping paper, glancing again at Levi through narrowed eyes. For a moment it seems to Levi like he wants to ask whether he knows what's in the package, but apparently thinks better of it, or deems it unlikely that Levi would know. He swears under his breath and shakes his head as he starts walking back toward the door.

"In the future all incoming deliveries must be brought to the mail room," he tells Levi sternly. "I don't care whose orders you're following. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Levi says, letting only the appropriate amount of relief into his voice. "Sir."

"Now get out of here," the officer commands and Levi is more than happy to oblige.

"Yes, sir," he mutters once more before crossing the room to the door. Just as he's about to step into the hallway, the man stops him one last time.

“Don’t forget your hat.”

Levi feels the panic and anger as a surge of blood to his head as he stops at the threshold and turns back, every limb fighting against his returning to the desk. He reaches out his hand and grabs a hold of the coarse fabric of the hat, fitting it on his head, feeling sweat gathering on the curve above his upper lip. By the time he faces the man again, he’s managed to fix an uneasy smile on his mouth.

“Thank you, sir,” Levi is forced to say as he passes by the officer and walks down the stairs and out of the building.

The evening air feels cool on his face as he crosses the barracks yard and directs his steps toward the church, the many towers of which he can already see against the rapidly darkening sky. He can smell his own sweat wafting over his face from the folds of the uniform jacket and he thinks he’ll be surprised if the edges of the pages he’s hiding won’t have wrinkled from the moisture. In his mind he’s already wary of how to tell the Commander that he gave the officer his name even though the man explicitly told him not to do so. Imagining the disappointment in his voice makes Levi grit his teeth and frown.

The interior of the church feels even cooler as Levi steps in, glancing quickly at the vaulted ceiling before scanning the benches, walking slowly and reverently down the aisle; he can see the bulky frame of the Commander and, to his relief, no one else besides, so he doesn’t hesitate in taking a seat on the bench in front of him, pulling the file clumsily out from under his clothes before slipping the documents through the gap between the seat and the backrest. The Commander grabs them and starts to read; in the silence that follows Levi realises he doesn’t know how Christian people pray and decides to sit still, hands folded in his lap, eyes focused on the image of Jesus on the cross that looms above the altar. Looking at the young man, his mournful face and malnourished figure, Levi can’t help but wonder how people can have forgotten so completely that the man was a Jew, given how close a resemblance to the ones still living he seems to bear.

“You’re wearing your hat,” the Commander’s voice finally drifts into his ear, soft and low.

Levi grunts in agreement as the man passes him the file and Levi slips it back under his jacket, jumping slightly at the sound of a door closing in the distance. A priest walks into and through the cavernous room, giving them an uninterested glance in passing, his steps echoing through the empty space.

“This Nazi piece of shit nearly caught me red handed,” Levi whispers back at the man, who leans forward in his seat, crossed hands pressed against the backrest of the bench in front of him. “I was leaving when he reminded me about the hat. I had to go back and get it.”

He can sense the Commander agreeing with his course of action from the silence that follows.

“I know I have to go back,” Levi says before the man gets a chance to tell him. “I’ll hide the hat and hope I won’t run into the same bastard twice.”

Levi can hear the Commander breathing loudly through his nose. “I suppose that’s our best plan of action,” he comments in a mumble, lips pressed lightly against the hands that are still gripping each other.

“There’s another thing you should know,” Levi says, leaning against the backrest of his bench and directing his gaze at his feet. “I gave him your name. He was questioning me and I couldn’t remember who I was supposed to be so I told him you sent me to get him off my back.”

The silence that follows this statement is different; Levi can sense the Commander processing this piece of information and perhaps – Levi hopes – already coming up with ways to repair the damage. Instinctively Levi looks for something else in the soundlessness as well, judgment perhaps, or frustration, but without seeing the man’s face it’s difficult to tell if any of it is present. Levi looks up at the skin-and-bone Jesus again, but doesn’t understand how people can find so much absolution in that pained expression.

“There’s nothing more you can do about it,” the man finally says, his voice as calm and gentle as before. “The rest is up to me. Meet me back in the restroom as soon as you can.”

Levi grunts quietly and cast a quick glance behind himself before taking off his hat and passing it to the Commander through the gap in the backrest.

“I better go,” he whispers before getting up and leaving the church.

Getting to the barracks the second time is considerably worse than the first; Levi can feel the muscles in his legs starting to ache from the simple act of walking, a testament to how tense he is now. The excitement of rebellion is gone, leaving behind nothing but nearly crippling apprehension and nervousness. Levi bites his teeth together and marches onward, trying to keep from glancing restlessly around himself at every passing soldier, most of whom don’t seem to pay him any mind. When he crosses a street he passes a man in a Panama hat, taking note of the way he stops to stare behind him, but when the raised voice he’s expecting doesn’t call after him, Levi lets his thoughts move on to mapping out the route to the office once again.

He enters the barracks through the same door as before, glad to find the entrance hall empty save for a few loitering troopers who barely give Levi an irritated glare as he marches over to the stairs and climbs them two at a time, stopping before he reaches the landing to peer around the corner at an empty hallway. He takes a right, keeping his steps as soundless as possible as he walks on, taking quick looks behind himself at the corridor, picking up his pace when he hears footsteps falling on the stone steps of the stairs behind him. He is half running now to reach the next turn to the right, his breath nearly wheezing by the time he reaches the office and slips into the room again, closing the door behind himself without letting it make a sound.

Levi’s hand hovers over the light switch for a few precious seconds as he considers his options, finally reaching a decision and running over to the desk, grabbing the file and placing it back inside the drawer precisely where he found it. Without thinking, Levi grabs the sleeve of his jacket and gives the handle of the drawer a quick polish before returning to the door, forcing a narrow crack between it and its frame for him to peer and listen through;

he counts ten seconds before exiting the office and starting down the hallway, nearly shivering with relief as the jacket of his uniform falls coolly against his back.

“Hey you! Shorty!”

The exclamation carries through the hallway onto the top of the stairs where Levi stands, perched on the topmost step frozen with fear. He can feel the hairs on the back of his head standing up as he remembers that day, the Gestapo, the chase that could’ve easily ended like the one he witnessed a mere two weeks later, with him lying face down in a pool of his own blood. Within seconds he’s holding his breath, his vision blurring for a moment, his ears ringing with the panic rattling in the narrowing confines of his mind.

Levi turns around slowly, numb with the realisation that he’s facing the man from before, the officer in his early thirties whom he asked for directions. He walks toward Levi, looking as irritated as before and Levi feels his lips drawing into something resembling a smile as a sort of relief washes over him. He greets the man as politely as he can, though it does nothing to wipe the annoyance off his face.

“Didn’t I see you leave before?” the officer asks angrily. “What are you still doing here, Sturmmann?”

“I thought I left my hat in the Generalleutnant’s office,” Levi explains, giving his best imitation of someone who doesn’t have a handle on things. “I came back to look for it but I couldn’t find it. I must’ve left it in the church instead.”

The officer looks down at him and frowns. “And you thought you could waltz into the office of a higher ranking officer just like that?”

“Please, sir,” Levi replies, giving his voice a whiny edge, “I can’t lose another one. I’ll be in so much trouble. I thought if I’d just go in quickly—”

“What do you think this place is, a lost and found office?” the man snaps at him angrily. “Get out before I report you to your superior.”

“Yes, sir,” Levi blurts out, stumbling on the stairs. “My apologies, sir.”

There’s no reason not to hurry now and so Levi nearly runs out, only slowing down as he crosses the inner courtyard and emerges, sweaty and breathless, onto the street beyond, heading towards the park on his trembling legs. He passes a street corner and something catches his eye: the white Panama hat. He glances at its owner, a middle-aged man in a beige suit, and their eyes meet for a second during which Levi’s mind rushes to wonder whether they’ve met somewhere before. When he continues on toward the park he can hear footsteps falling in behind him and he doesn’t need to look back to know the man is following.

Levi’s head is loud with questions: did the man see him before? was he already following when he entered the church? does he know something? what does he know? He casts a careful glance behind his back; the man is not hurrying to catch up to him but seems content with keeping the twenty metre distance they have between them. His eyes meet Levi’s again and he looks away instantly, crossing the street and entering the shade of the trees that turns

the dark of the evening even more impenetrable. He follows a small footpath, keeping his gait casual as he approaches the public lavatory. Just as he's about to walk down the stairs, he turns back one more time only to see the man passing under a streetlamp and continuing in his direction.

Levi enters the toilet, his concern eased only a little by the sight of the Commander leaning onto the wall. When he's about to open his mouth Levi shakes his head sharply, nodding toward the booth into which the man retreats without question. Levi walks over to the urinal and unzips his trousers, wondering how he'll ever manage a proper clean-up in a place like this, should it become necessary for the Commander to cut the man's throat to keep him quiet. He tries to relax enough to take a piss, but just as the first drops start to gather, the door to the lavatory flies open and the man enters, making Levi lose his focus. He walks straight towards him, leaving only a forearm's length between them before turning toward the urinal as well. Levi fights to loosen up his muscles again and somehow manages to get a steady stream going even with sensing the man's eyes following him from the mirror in front of them.

"Not many men like you out tonight," the man suddenly says.

Though his voice is quiet, it seems to pierce the silence like a bullet, making Levi flinch as he finally realises what this is. There's a pause in his efforts to empty his bladder and he glances up at their reflections in the mirror, meeting the man's eyes for a second. He used to know how to do this, long ago it seems, but those half-forgotten memories are turning up nothing of use for him to say and before he can explore that former life of his any further, the door of the booth opens and the Commander walks out, clearing his throat before choosing a spot before the urinal on Levi's right. As soon as he's finished undoing his slacks, Levi turns his eyes away, glancing at the man who has flinched at the Commander's sudden appearance but remained in his spot by Levi's other side.

Levi's gaze finds the Commander's in the mirror and he knows for this to look genuine it's not the man's face he should be looking at right now. Those blue eyes give away nothing as the man goes on emptying his bladder and for a moment Levi wonders if the Commander was once as familiar with this as he himself was. Somehow, like the knowledge has been imbedded into his muscle memory on those marginally easier days, Levi thinks to shift the weight of his body on his feet, moving a few centimetres toward the Commander; he can smell that musty scent of sweat again that somehow seems to fit so seamlessly into the situation. Levi looks at the reflection of the man on his left, their eyes meet briefly and suddenly all is understood between them; the man leaves without saying a word.

As soon as the door closes behind him, Levi turns away from the Commander and readjusts his trousers, casting a glance behind himself before stepping into the booth; the man's face is as unreadable as ever, a slight frown lining his forehead, knitting those thick brows over his eyes until the bright blue looks almost black. Levi closes the door and leans on the wall, taking a few deep breaths of the stench of stale piss before rummaging through the paper bag on the floor to find his own clothes. He changes into them quickly, the sight of his own skin suddenly foreign, and replaces the contents of the bag with the uniform, which he wishes the Commander will have the good sense to burn as soon as he gets home. He can hear the man zipping up his trousers on the other side of the door but lingers for a moment longer before

emerging, relieved to find himself staring back at him in the mirror instead of the Sturmmann.

The dingy lavatory is full of the things they probably should be saying right now, but something about what happened seems to have made speaking difficult. Levi struggles for words for a while before giving up and leaving the bathroom with nothing more than a nod. As he walks back across the city, wondering whether his tired feet will manage to take him that far, Levi's mind seems exhausted into a state of utter blankness for which he is grateful, all things considered. It's only in their small kitchen while cleaning himself with a wet towel that Levi lets the emotions pierce through again, not surprised at the exhilaration that reappears, stronger than fear or worry or confusion. He feels worn but alive, the kind of weariness that comes from accomplishment, contributing, taking charge.

When he goes to bed that night, falling asleep to Farlan pulling him closer in their bed, Levi is sure nothing can spoil that feeling, but the east-bound trains in his dreams know otherwise. By the time he wakes up, Krieger has filled every corner of his mind and he is forced to escape the company of his friends, not being able to hide his mood from them but knowing it will make them worry to see him like this. He leaves the apartment under the pretence of work, sitting in parks and following the river until making his way to the Commander's apartment. Even there his mood improves only slightly; the man is donning that revolting uniform again, every bit the soldier, reminding him constantly of the night ahead.

"I want to thank you again for your help," the Commander tells him with a smile, sitting down by the secretaire; Levi wonders if he's already typed out the copy of the file from last night and locked it in the drawer. "I hope you know I'm not exaggerating when I say I couldn't have carried out the mission without your assistance."

Levi shrugs indifferently. "It's what you pay me for," he barely says as he enters the kitchen and starts going through the pile of dishes.

Beyond the splashing of the water Levi can hear the steady clicking of the typewriter and tries to lose himself in it and the task at hand, tries to recapture that feeling he gets in this home, reminds himself of the soft, wooden glow of the sitting room when painted by the setting sun, but something seems to block his thoughts, making even the cleaning feel like a shitty job the Commander has seen fit to push off to worthless scum like him. He feels small and powerless, there's nothing left of the person he was allowed to be just a day before; suddenly he's back to being someone's servant, a convenience. That feeling clings to him for the rest of the evening, and by dinner time Levi wants to rip his own skin off just to feel something other than this lack of being. Sitting at the table Levi can't bear to look up and see that uniform, a constant reminder of why things are like this and because of whom; just the outline of it at the edge of his vision is enough to cause him to shudder and bite down so hard he fears his teeth will crack. When he finally breaks, the sudden loudness of his voice after the previous sullen silence is enough to make the Commander give a start.

"Will you just take that fucking thing off?" Levi snaps, his voice equal parts anger and desperation. "I understand you have to wear it all day but to fucking wear it in your home? You fucking disgust me."

The man jumps instantly to his feet and shakes off his jacket, hiding it from Levi by placing it on a chair under the table. He then takes off his cufflinks and hides them under the rim of his plate.

“I’m sorry, I should have realised—”

“I’m getting fucking sick of hearing you apologise to me,” Levi interrupts him, knowing that raising his voice won’t force any of that dread out of him. “How about for once you just don’t do something that you need to apologise for?”

The man’s face grows serious, though that anger that Levi was hoping to provoke is not there; he senses the Commander’s confusion in the way he looks at him, observing, evaluating, trying to see through Levi’s behaviour into the reasons behind it, and suddenly Levi is struck by the fear he might succeed. He pushes back his plate and gets up.

“I lost my appetite,” he merely says before leaving the kitchen.

During the last hours at the Commander’s, Levi scrubs the bathtub obsessively, leaving the bathroom only when his arms are trembling from the effort. The Commander helps him pack the food without saying a word, handing him some money at the door, asking whether he thinks it’s enough; Levi pushes the notes into his pocket without counting them and leaves the apartment without so much as a thank you. The things he said before follow him all the way to Krieger’s apartment where they finally make room for bigger concerns.

The man has been drinking again, Levi can tell as soon as he sees him leaning onto the door as he holds it open for Levi to enter and as soon as he does Krieger traps him. He grabs the bags of food Levi’s carrying and empties them on the floor, demanding to know where he got them, falling ever faster into that pattern of insults and accusations. Levi feels his usual apathy give way in the face of the anger that bursts through the surface, a hopeless clinging to something he had and lost, a desperate refusal to be no one again. Words failing, he swings his fist into the man’s jaw in a painful collision that seems to give the man the excuse he needs to grab a handful of Levi’s hair and slam his head hard against the bedroom wall. The impact leaves Levi dull with pain and he falls to the floor, eyes watering and ears ringing with the rush of blood to his head.

“Jesus,” Krieger moans above him, kneeling down hurriedly to place a hand on Levi’s head only to have him push it away in disgust. “Levi, you know... You know I didn’t mean it, don’t you?”

The sound of his name makes Levi shudder; in his confusion he feels as if Krieger is trying to steal it, the one thing that’s still him, like through the man they’re taking what’s still left, the precious things, the ones Levi’s fought the hardest to keep.

“Don’t fucking touch me,” he growls at the man, who pays his words no mind, laying a hand on his shoulder; Levi doesn’t shake it off.

“I don’t want to hurt you, you know that. Why do you have to make it so impossible? Hmm?” he asks Levi now, his voice pleading and irritated as Levi struggles back onto his feet before taking a seat on the bed.

The dark room is still unfocused and Levi feels tired unto death, like the anger he felt before has burned through him again leaving him scarred and consumed. Without it he feels miserable, useless and lost, like the clarity and direction he had before were nothing but a mirage, a deceptively vivid hallucination in the wasteland that his life has been turned into. As Krieger clambers behind him on the bed Levi tries to think about the Commander but can't; it seems the man has no place in this house.

"Let me make you feel good," Krieger breathes hotly into his ear, pinning him between himself and the mattress. "I know what you like. Do you remember? Hmm?"

Levi doesn't look at him. His eyes are scanning the ceiling, the knots in the wood connecting under his gaze as Krieger's hands find his body. He wonders if it could be alright, allowing his body to feel the pleasure that his mind has been denied, whether he could this time, whether it would be different.

"Levi," the man grunts; the name is a curse. "There's no one like you, Levi. I'll never love anyone like I love you."

In the end Levi doesn't fight it though he knows he'll hate himself for it, like he knew he'd feel more disgusted after each moan breaking out from his throat. The conclusion is how it's always been, his body alive with violent shudders where Krieger's is heavy with pleasure and contentment, lulling the man to sleep as soon as his head hits the pillow. Levi barely uses the bathroom before stuffing the food back into the bags and leaving the apartment. He knows instantly he can't go home – the memory of Farlan's fingers in his hair is too vivid – so he follows his steps back across town, showing up uninvited at the Commander's door. The man answers quickly, still dressed in his shirt and trousers, bare feet poking out of the pant legs before Levi looks up at his face which is inquisitive but not aggressive.

"I know I shouldn't have come here," Levi whispers, his voice echoless in the hallway, "but can I please come in?"

The man hesitates for a moment before stepping aside, letting Levi push past him, drop the bags on the floor and hurry into the bathroom. He avoids his reflection in the mirror as he draws a bath, making sure the water is slightly too hot for comfort as he undresses, keeping his eyes from his body and stepping into the tub, feeling the heat of the water pinching his skin. Only then does he look through the surface at himself, summoning back that surge of rage, letting it engulf his mind and burn through every ounce of his being. His hand grabs a hold of a small enamel soap dish and he throws it hard against the tiled wall; it falls with a clatter that nearly masks the soft knock on the door.

"May I come in?" the Commander asks and Levi agrees with a grunt, his shallow breathing turning slowly deeper. He doesn't look at the man as he sits down on the toilet, just keeps staring ahead of himself at the smudge of soap on the wall.

"Is there a problem I can—"

"No," Levi answers the question before the man has finished it, feeling shame rising along with those softly spoken words. For a while the only sound is the dripping of the faucet until the Commander starts again.

“Perhaps you’d like to talk–”

“No,” Levi says again, keeping his voice as steady as his mind is not. He can see from the corner of his eye the man shifting impatiently on his seat and feels almost sorry; for a man like that it can’t be easy to sit still and do nothing.

“Is there anything you need?” the Commander finally asks, and Levi can tell he’s relieved when he nods, turning to look at him.

“I need to stay here tonight,” Levi tells him unapologetically, relieved when the man grants him his unspoken wish and doesn’t ask him why.

“Anything I can do to help,” the Commander merely replies, standing up again. “I’ll make us some tea while you finish your bath.”

Levi sits in the water for a long time after he’s left the room, like forcing his body to bear that heat is removing Krieger’s touches from his skin. When he gets out he dries himself on one of the clean towels from the corner cupboard and that faint scent of lavender seems to do its own part, making Levi feel like the smell of those musty sheets has been replaced with something much more pleasant if not more familiar – something of the home. He joins the Commander in the sitting room and they drink their tea without speaking; the man has brought him a pillow and a blanket, both of which carry that same hint of lavender which seems to envelop Levi as he finally lays down his head.

“If there’s anything else I can help you with–”

“I don’t like to need help,” Levi explains, keeping his eyes on the ceiling. “Especially not from you.”

The Commander is quiet for a moment before whispering, “I understand.” Just as he’s about to leave the room, Levi speaks up again.

“I need to do more,” he says, only now realising the decision has been fighting its way out for some time. He thinks of Krieger, the constant state of not-being the man makes him feel and knows: this is where he’ll find the balance. “More of what we did. Not just clean-up.”

Levi senses more than sees the Commander’s posture growing rigid as he turns to look behind himself, and for a moment Levi fears he’s going to refuse.

“Alright,” the man finally says. “We can discuss it further in the morning. Good night then, Herr Weller.”

“Levi,” he corrects the man without thinking, hoping that simple sound could express that wordless wish: please, please, make it sound good again. “My name is Levi.”

“Levi,” Erwin repeats, and it sounds softer from his lips. “Finally a name that suits you.”

WARNINGS

- foul language
- sexual abuse
- tiny bit of violence

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Hope you enjoy chapter five! The next chapter will be posted on November 6th.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi wipes a drop of sweat off his temple as he squats behind the empty train carriage, peering through the darkness at the railway yard. The heat of the night is sweltering, making it harder to breathe and focus, and Levi can feel the perspiration pooling on the small of his back as he leans onto the warm metal and tries to keep his wits about himself, his heart skipping a beat whenever he thinks he sees a figure in the distance. The sound of approaching thunder nearly masks the sound of the other man's footsteps as he returns, sitting next to Levi and sniffing the air before leaning closer.

"They go by twos, every fifteen minutes or so," Mike whispers in his accented German, handing Levi a handgun. "Ever fired one of these?"

Levi takes the gun almost reluctantly, weighing it in his hand. "No," he admits quietly as the man proceeds to demonstrate how to load it with such ease and efficiency Levi gets the sense he's been shooting things since he was a toddler.

"Let's hope that'll still be the case after tonight," Mike mutters more to himself it seems as Levi tightens his grip around the gun awkwardly, trying to decide where to point it and how to hold it, not sure whether the sweat on his brow is caused by the heat any more. "We wait until they've finished their next round before making our way to the train. You keep watch while I do my thing. Ten minutes, in and out, regroup here, wait them out and leave. Got it?"

Levi nods sternly, keeping his teeth gritted as he fights to keep his wrists from giving in under the weight of the gun and tries to steady his breathing, eyes scanning the surroundings nervously. Mike seems to sense his unease.

"It's an easy job," he assures Levi. "I've done it a dozen times. Don't worry about it."

"Right," Levi grunts, knowing his mood has as much to do with the company as it does with the situation.

They fall quiet as they wait, Levi's grip around the gun getting sweatier by the second until he's forced to wipe his hand on the hem of his shirt. The air seems to close in around them, thick and hot and humid and suddenly Levi feels incredibly thirsty; like an answer to that yearning, heavy rain starts to fall, accompanied by the low rumble of thunder. Mike sniffs at the air again and smiles to himself as he sneaks toward the edge of the carriage. Levi keeps an eye on the rail yard, but with the weather getting worse he relaxes a little, trying to move past his mistrust of the American.

Of course it was Erwin who asked for Levi's help again, and had the request come from Mike himself Levi isn't sure he would've agreed even with his role being relatively simple. Since Mike's main tasks in the operation take place outside the city, he needed a guide in case things didn't go according to plan, someone to help him evade pursuers, though Levi isn't sure which of his usual routes and hiding places the man will fit into, so just as Mike hopes Levi won't have to use the gun, Levi hopes Mike won't have to try and push his hulking frame through the narrow passageways Levi is used to. The way Erwin explained the mission made it sound easy, but it was the man's trust in Mike that finally convinced Levi. Now that they're out here, however, Levi can't help but feel Erwin's absence as a kind of hesitation he's not experienced before.

From the steady hammering of the rain Levi can finally make out voices, the guards talking to one another as they make their round. He looks over at Mike, who's following them with his eyes, his back pressed against the train carriage; he's holding up his hand to Levi, gesturing to him when the soldiers have passed. Levi gets swiftly on his feet and they run, doubled over, to the supply train waiting on its tracks. They stride along it to get to the engine and Mike climbs on board, leaving Levi standing in the rain, glancing nervously from side to side half-hidden between the carriages, the gun threatening to slip from his hands as he wonders whether he'll really be able to fire it should he have to. He squints through the rain, trying to see any shapes resembling people as a flash of lightning illuminates the rail yard for an instant; the noise that follows is louder than before.

Levi tries to evaluate the passing of time to anticipate the soldiers' return, but the frantic beating of his heart seems to confuse his mind and soon he isn't sure whether he's been standing guard for two minutes or twelve. He can hear Mike tampering with the engine; the metallic bangs and clinks are hidden under another loud crash of thunder as it rolls over the sky toward the city. Levi swears in his mind as his eyes dart wildly across the open area and he knows the grey uniforms will be very difficult to spot in the misty darkness; if the soldiers keep quiet or if their voices are covered by the thunder it will spell trouble for Levi and Mike, but there's no helping the situation, and Levi is left moving his finger on the trigger of the gun.

"Hurry up," he whispers more to himself than Mike, but minutes tick by and the man doesn't reappear. Levi grits his teeth as he peers around the corner of the carriage, wondering now how Erwin managed to talk him into this, and how he's come from doing simple clean-up to getting ready to shoot someone to help an American spy sabotage the engine of a supply train.

Thunder booms again when Mike finally jumps out of the train. Levi looks around, trying to see past the downpour, eventually signalling to the tall man that the coast is clear, though he's

far from being sure it is. As they run back, following their earlier route, Levi can feel his heart as a low, humming pulse in his head and the frantic flow of his blood in his ears nearly drowns out the sound of the rain. They stop in the gap between two carriages and Levi tries desperately to catch his breath, which is falling shallow, but in the sweltering, humid heat it's hard to fill his lungs, and even after being soaked by the rain he can sense he's sweating profusely. He leans against the train as Mike peers across the rail yard, stepping next to Levi and loading the gun in his hand.

"I think I saw something," he says, his voice as calm as ever as Levi grits his teeth. "The rain should cover us but we have to go now."

Levi nods and they break into a run, treading as lightly and quietly on the gravel as they can manage; he knows better than to glance around himself and directs his eyes on the ground to keep his footing, watching Mike's heels in front of him to stay on course. He thinks he can hear muffled voices carrying across the yard, but in the state he's in it's difficult to say whether he's just imagining it. He tries to focus on the running, but his mind is busy with the gun, wondering if he should load it just in case, reminding himself again and again how it's done. It takes Levi a moment to notice Mike has picked up his pace and he's falling behind, but though he tries to run faster, his legs feel weak and tired already.

They're two thirds of the way to safety when a lightning splits the sky, providing the darkness with a second of light, and from the shouts suddenly erupting behind them Levi can tell it has lasted a second too long. The roaring of thunder that follows covers both Levi's curses and the gunshot from the guards; he can see the flash of spark as the bullet hits the iron fixtures on the empty train carriage ahead. The burst of new adrenaline to his limbs helps him dash forward and he loads his gun without thinking, aiming a hasty shot behind himself and to the left; the gun kicks back harder than he's thought, colliding with his cheekbone with great force, but Levi can barely feel the pain as he fights to keep up with Mike, whose long legs have carried him behind the empty car and out of sight. As Levi follows him, he can hear more voices joining the previous ones behind himself, and another loud gunshot is followed by a bullet ripping through the heavy wooden boards of the carriage.

Levi catches up to Mike who has slowed down to take a shot at their pursuers, and Levi can guess from the angry yells that Mike's aim was better than his. As they sprint across a set of tracks Levi can hear dogs barking in the distance, but he knows in this weather the animals won't bring much of an advantage. As they crawl under the barbed wire fence a bullet hits the ground so close to Levi's head that it sends a puff of dust into his eyes. He wipes it away quickly and looks over the open area they still need to cross before reaching the outskirts of the city where the warehouses and factories will provide ample opportunities for hiding. As another bullet whizzes past, Levi's mind is racing, considering all the places he's mapped out for remaining unseen, but as he looks over at the bulky frame of the American, he realises many of them aren't big enough for the other man to fit into. He curses in his head again as another lightning flashes and the sound of revving engines blends into the adjoining boom of thunder.

They race across the clearing, headlights drawing long shadows of their legs over the sparse grass as bullets tear at the earth around them; one shoots by Mike's left arm, leaving behind a smear of red but the man barely flinches as he quickens his pace to take cover behind the first

building they reach, a massive warehouse built from large red bricks. As they run past it, Mike suddenly grabs the back of Levi's shirt, pushing him ahead.

"You're in charge now," he says, sounding winded but calm, and Levi grits his teeth, out of determination instead of nervousness this time.

He leads Mike further into the industrial area, cutting across clearings and passing between buildings, making sure to keep track of the sound of engines growing softer to their right. He knows losing their pursuers here would be ideal since there's always a greater chance of eyewitnesses in residential areas, but the incessant barking of dogs is drawing closer by the minute and Levi knows the soldiers will be much more meticulous in searching these buildings than they will be in looking for them further. The closer to the tenement houses they get, the closer an eye Levi keeps on ladders and fire escapes, though his mind is busily warning him against hiding on a rooftop; in such a poor neighbourhood fire safety is clearly no priority, however, which decides the matter for Levi. The sound of cars is getting louder again and Levi knows when it stops they'll be in trouble since it'll most likely mean the vehicles will have moved in more soldiers to surround them.

The houses grow less run-down the further they get from the rail yard, but Levi feels the opposite is happening to his body; though being aware of his pursuers has proven to enhance his escape in the past, it seems to have no such effect on him now. He feels a dull ache spreading up his legs and he feels more winded than ever before in his life, and he can tell Mike is slowing down his pace to ensure not speeding past him. Levi fights to ignore it, all the different signs that tell him he's in serious trouble, struggles to keep his mind focused on finding a place to hide for long enough to recover his strength. He squints to see through the rain, to spot anything in their surroundings that could be useful, but finds nothing. He's slowly starting to panic and his running slows down even further until he's merely walking.

"Hey!" Mike snaps at him, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him roughly. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Levi stares at the man for a few seconds, barely recognising him; the sound of the engines is drawing closer. Somewhere beyond the fog in his mind Levi realises Mike's expression has grown pained. He mutters something in his own language before grabbing a strong hold of Levi's neck and kicking his legs out from under him, sending him face down in a puddle of murky water; Levi's arms hit the ground in a painful attempt to shield his face. He makes the mistake of gasping out of shock; his mouth fills instantly with the taste of earth and shit and he pushes himself quickly back on his feet, coughing and spitting while rubbing the dirt from his eyes. As soon as his gaze finds focus he swings his fist at Mike; it collides painfully with his jaw.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he asks the other man, who looks as though he's not sure whether he should laugh or push Levi's face back in the puddle.

"Didn't I just ask you that?" he replies angrily. "Just get us the fuck out of here like you're supposed to."

Levi glares at the man for a second longer before they continue down the street, taking a left onto a narrow alleyway at the end of which Levi sees what he's been looking for: a rickety

wooden ladder leading up to the roof of a small, three-storey factory building. Mike follows Levi up to the roof, falling next to him to catch his breath. Levi closes his eyes, his hand resting on his rapidly moving chest as he listens to the barking of the dogs in the distance and lets the rain wash away the rest of the mud on his face.

They stay on the roof for what feels to Levi like hours as the thunder rolls over the city, growing so loud at times that it drowns out the sounds of their pursuers. By some stroke of luck they seem to leave the alleyway unchecked, though by Levi's estimate they come as close as a few streets over before moving their search closer to the city proper. Their cars and torches are the only source of light for kilometres, and Levi follows them as they move further and further away until they disappear into the dim glow of the city beyond the rain.

When they finally climb back down to the alley, they start walking towards the river, the one landmark Mike is comfortable navigating by. They separate when they reach the first bridge as Mike continues further into the city and Levi crosses it to make his way home, walking quickly enough to seem like someone who wants to get out of the rain. When he finally reaches the right street, the rain has calmed into a drizzle; Levi makes his way unhurriedly to the door where he stops for a moment to take off his shoes before climbing up the stairs soundlessly, his drenched socks leaving a wet imprint of his toes on the grey stone steps.

He slips into the apartment, sensing Isabel and Farlan's sleeping in the silence disturbed only by the quiet thump as he closes the door behind himself. He sneaks into the kitchen and lights a candle; the sudden brightness makes Isabel turn muttering towards the wall. Levi removes the wet, muddy clothes and rinses them through in the sink before wringing out the water and hanging them above the stove to dry. He then cleans himself with a towel and a bar of soap that smells better on Farlan when he finally crawls into bed and presses his body close to the other man.

"You're starting to make a habit of it," he mutters sleepily without opening his eyes; there's a sharpness to his tone that tells Levi he's not pleased.

"Of what?" he asks back, his cold feet making Farlan groan impatiently.

"Of staying out all night," the other clarifies. "I know you've been doing it for a while but lately it's getting out of hand. We never know where you are or whether you're coming back. Isabel asks after you constantly. I never know what to say to her."

Levi grits his teeth as guilt and shame take over and he doesn't know what to say, or what to do to make the situation better. The silence lingers, uncomfortable and full of promises Levi should be making, but can't.

"I guess we'll talk about it tomorrow then," Farlan whispers before scrunching up his pillow and drawing his knees closer to his chest.

Levi sighs as he turns on his back and stares up at the ceiling in the dark. His body aches like it's been pounded with a hammer, every muscle fighting to relax but failing and his mind seems to be suffering from the same. He knows he's not considered Isabel and Farlan for a while now, not like he should have, and it's no wonder that they're starting to grow weary of it. When he weighs things in his mind it's not difficult to see what matters most; Farlan and

Isabel should always win against whatever personal yearning Levi has, and he knows he should never have offered his services to the Commander, should never have gone back to his apartment – God knows the man would have let Levi be if he hadn't, would probably still let him leave it all if Levi asked for it – but when he thinks about it he knows he couldn't go back to that, the idleness, the days melting into one another sitting indoors all day or looking for meaningless work, always wondering whether the next person to employ him will be the one to scrutinise over his papers or to tell him to drop his trousers to prove he's not a Jew. Besides, something so simple as food and a bit of money could never compare to what Erwin provides him with: a chance to do his part for the war, to fight the people he hates so viciously, to pour out some of that poison in his life – how many people like him have ever had an opportunity like that?

Levi glances at the sleeping figure beside him and frowns at the heaviness in his head, guilt and shame and sleep all dragging him down. He tries to remind himself of Erwin's words: Germany's defeat is only a matter of time now, but it's still difficult to think that far after having lived so long day by day, hour by hour. Should they make it that far, what would the ending of the war mean for any of them? Levi knows there is no room for any illusions before such time – to believe in the benevolence of the opposing forces would be the height of all stupidity. The city is likely to get bombed, just like Berlin has been for years, and the more refugees pour into Dresden the more likely it is to become a target. As the outcome of the war becomes inevitable, the pressure on Levi and Farlan from neighbours and strangers alike will probably increase as well; no doubt everyone with a cock will be sent to defend the fatherland before the end, and anyone unwilling will likely be subjected to whatever punishment an angry mob is capable of concocting. Before he finally drifts off, Levi realises numbly that there are far too many things to protect his friends from than is in his power to shield them against.

Levi wakes up the following morning to a throbbing pain on his face, noticeable now as the exhaustion of the previous night has run its course. He groans against his pillow before pushing himself up, dressing slowly and exiting the apartment without passing through the kitchen where he can hear Farlan and Isabel laying the table for breakfast. He visits the communal bathroom, having to wait his turn as the other inhabitant of the third floor, Frau Schultz, finishes washing out her grandson's mouth with soap.

"They have to learn," she explains to Levi over the crying of the child and he nods mutely, though he's not sure what sort of a lesson the boy is supposed to get out of this.

After he's done relieving himself, Levi washes his hands, eyes scanning the reflection in the stained mirror and he feels like groaning again. The kickback from the handgun has left a bruise on his right cheekbone and landing in the puddle has scratched small patches of skin off his chin. His arms are still aching from the impact and when he looks down Levi notices the red of his knuckles clearly against the white skin of his hands. He sighs heavily before splashing some water on his face and walking back into the apartment, where Farlan nearly drops his cup of tea at the sight of Levi's face.

“Jesus Christ,” he gasps, rushing over to Levi and poking gently at his bruised cheek, making him wince from the pain nonetheless. “What happened to you?”

“It’s nothing,” Levi says, pulling back from the man’s touch and sitting down at the table next to Isabel. “I fell down, that’s all.”

Farlan and Isabel share a look which from his part is incredulous. “Please,” he mutters as he turns to the stove to save their fried eggs from burning. “You must think we’re so stupid.”

“I fell,” Levi repeats almost angrily, realising it technically is the truth. “How the fuck do you think I got this?”

Farlan stays sullenly silent as he lifts the eggs onto plates, carrying them to the table and sitting down without saying a word.

“Does it hurt, big brother?” Isabel asks Levi quietly and he shakes his head.

“No, it doesn’t,” he assures her before attacking his egg with a knife and a fork while Farlan snorts derisively across the table. “What?”

“I think it’s pretty obvious what happened and I bet it has nothing to do with you falling down,” the other man snaps at him.

“Well tell me then,” Levi replies, his temper flaring at Farlan’s confrontational tone, “since you clearly know better than I do.”

“I don’t understand why you feel the need to pretend with us,” Farlan tells him, the anger in his expression suddenly giving way to a hint of concern. “I know it was that man who did that to you and I don’t understand why you won’t talk to us and let us help you.”

“What man?” Levi asks back, thinking about Krieger, who he knows would be more than capable of leaving him looking like he does.

“The man you work for,” Farlan says instead. “Does he know about you? Is that why he treats you this way?”

“He doesn’t treat me any way!” Levi argues heatedly. “I fell down! I told you before, I clean his apartment, I do his laundry, I run his errands and that’s it! He pays me well and treats me like any other fucking human being and if you don’t believe me then I can’t help you.”

Farlan stares at him from across the table, his breathing heavy. “So you’re honestly telling me,” he starts, his voice calm but sharp, “that you like running around the city doing his bidding until God knows how late almost every night?”

“I like working for him,” Levi replies sourly. “He pays me fairly and minds his own fucking business. If for that I need to stay out late sometimes then so be it.”

“And what about me and Isabel?” Farlan asks now and Levi feels that sting of guilt again, but it only manages to add to his irritation. “What happens when one night you don’t come back anymore?”

“That has nothing to do with me working for him,” Levi tells him, though he wishes he didn’t have to. “That has always been the case and you know it. Even if none of us ever left this apartment it wouldn’t mean we’d be any safer, Farlan. The ‘Stapo could have taken me months ago, before I even had this job.”

“It doesn’t make it any less suspicious!” Farlan counters angrily. “The neighbours are going to think you’re up to no good if you keep behaving this way! This isn’t some east Berlin slum, Levi! These are decent, hard-working people—”

“Decent people?” Levi asks back, incredulous. “What kind of a decent person turns his neighbours in to the Gestapo for harbouring Jews knowing full well they’ll be executed for it?”

Farlan’s eyes narrow. “We don’t know that someone ratted them out—”

“Yes, we do,” Levi tells him, his anger making it difficult to think rationally. “Böhmer told me he did it himself. So there are your decent fucking people and your decent fucking neighbourhood. Don’t you feel safer already?”

“How was I supposed to fucking know that? You never tell me anything, not about Böhmer, not about your work, not about where you spent the night a couple weeks ago. It was well past nine when you got back home and I—”

“Stop it, you two!”

Levi and Farlan both turn to look at Isabel, whose breathing has turned heavy with anger.

“You’re acting like such brats!” she snaps, grabbing the edge of the table with her hands. “If my mum were here she’d give you both an earful!”

Levi turns from Isabel to Farlan, whose expression has grown surprised under the angry blush on his cheeks. Levi isn’t sure he’s ever heard Isabel raising her voice, and she certainly hasn’t mentioned her mother and though sometimes Levi has trouble remembering his own, he finds it terribly sad nonetheless. A shocked, pained silence fills the kitchen and they all seem to be avoiding each other’s eyes.

“We’re all doing the best we can, aren’t we?” Isabel breaks the silence, her voice growing quiet and hoarse as she goes on. “If Levi says he can’t help working all night then he can’t help it and nothing we say is going to change that, Farlan. It’s us who need to stop worrying so much and trust that he’ll always be back by morning. And maybe one morning he won’t be but us losing sleep over it won’t change that either.”

“Isabel...” Farlan whispers and the girl goes on.

“It’s how life is now, isn’t it?” she says, her eyes on the table but her expression dispassionate. “People disappear all the time and are never heard from again. They take them to the beach and shoot them, you know, and throw the bodies in these big holes they’ve dug in the sand. We once did that to a horse, but it was old and dying. You don’t have to be old and dying for them to take you away like that, not anymore.”

Levi stares at the girl and wonders which is worse, the enthusiasm of the denial she's in every day or this glimpse behind that mask, all this sadness and strength when faced with the thought of death at such a young age. He tries to remember himself ten years ago, wonders whether he was like her but things weren't so bad back then, not by a long shot, and there was still hope that all of it would blow over, and by the time the war started Levi was an adult whereas Isabel was just a child, and the horrors she's grown up with are real to her in a way they never will be to Levi, which might be why she fights so hard to suppress them. He wishes more than anything that Isabel's words were just speculation, a child's explanation to something terrible that she can't understand, but looking at her face now, he knows and shudders.

"Oh, Jesus," Farlan breathes, his eyes filled with tears as he covers them with his hand. "How can anyone live like this? I wasn't supposed to live like this."

A part of Levi wants to remind Farlan of the alternative, burning and killing his way through one derelict town in Russia after another before getting shot or blown up thousands of kilometres from home, but it seems too cruel and he stays silent, looking at Isabel. Her eyes have grown distant, her face as impassive as ever and Levi can tell she's re-erecting that wall to keep all those things in and he doesn't blame her for it. After all, how else is she supposed to keep on living?

On the other side of the table Farlan sobs audibly. "I'm sorry, Isabel," he says, his voice broken. "I know I'm weak. I can't even imagine..." His voice breaks off and he swallows arduously. "What you two have been through, and what I... I know it's nothing. It's nothing."

Levi and Isabel watch him in silence, both looking for some words of comfort perhaps, but coming up with nothing. Farlan wipes at his eyes and lifts his gaze from the table wearily and Levi knows it's not his fault, he wasn't built for this, some people aren't. Just like Erwin said, it's strange for people to keep fighting in these circumstances, and he knows Farlan is right: he was never supposed to live like this.

"I wish I could be better, I really do. I wish I could be brave like you and pull my own weight like everyone else. I don't know—" His words break off abruptly and he pauses to clear his throat. "I don't know why I'm like this. I didn't use to be like this. It was only after Christofer—"

Farlan stops speaking again and flinches like saying that name aloud has physically hurt him. Levi can sense Isabel turning to him with a question and he shakes his head a bit to keep her from asking it, since there is no sense in bringing all of that up now. He gets up and walks around the table to take a seat next to Farlan, drawing the chair as close to the other man as he can, looking for something to say.

"Didn't I tell you before," he finally speaks, trying to keep his tone light to break the tension in the room, "that you help more than you know. I know I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you."

Farlan lets out a snort of laughter. "Sure," he utters, pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket and blowing his nose on it.

“I mean it,” Levi insists. “Neither of us would have a roof over our heads if it weren’t for you. Did you ever think of that? Not to mention that you keep us both fed. I could barely boil water when I met you.”

Farlan seems to consider these words in the silence that follows before Isabel jumps in, not a trace left of the person of just a few minutes ago.

“And you’ve taught me so much too, Farlan. My reading is much better now than it was before, and I couldn’t speak a word of French. I know so much more and it’s all because of you. And think about how much better you’ve been doing lately!”

Farlan laughs again, but this time the sound is more genuine. He blows his nose a second time and looks up at the two of them, his grey eyes misty, looking at Isabel like hardly believing she can say things like that and be so strong for other people. Levi gives his hair a playful tug before walking over to the stove and moving the skillet into the sink to give his hands something to do, hoping that by doing something, anything, he can keep the fear of death from filling the apartment.

“You just need to stop being so fucking morbid all the time,” he says briskly at Farlan as he starts scrubbing the frying pan. “After all, who knows? Maybe things won’t get any worse than this. And whether they do or don’t really isn’t up to you.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t,” Farlan admits with a forced brightness to his tone and though Levi doesn’t look at him it sounds to him like he’s smiling. “I just wish I could shake all these terrible thoughts I keep having, that’s all.”

“I’ll help you!” Isabel exclaims suddenly. “Whenever you’re having a terrible thought just come to me and I’ll tell you to stop having it. You’ll feel better in no time.”

Farlan’s laughter fills the kitchen for a moment, making the quiet afterward seem deeper. “Agreed,” he says, but after Isabel has left to visit Frau Gernhardt he wraps his arms around Levi and whispers, “I’m so worried about her, Levi.”

“I know,” Levi says quietly, “but there’s nothing we can do about it now. Maybe afterward we can help her make sense of it, but for now this is how it has to be.”

Farlan leans his chin against Levi’s shoulder and sighs. “I don’t know how she does it, how either of you do it. I just can’t stop thinking about it. Can’t stop thinking about him.”

Levi nods. “Maybe that’s not a bad thing,” he says. “Maybe after all this is over you—”

“Please,” Farlan interrupts him gently, “don’t say that.”

They spend a few days in peace and quiet and though under normal circumstances Levi would resent it, he finds the calm a welcome change. He wakes up later than usual every morning, quietly grateful to Farlan for letting him sleep, and during the days he feels content playing cards with his friends or listening in on their French lessons. In the evenings they all

lie in bed and talk about how life was before, coming up with funny stories to make each other laugh and flipping through Isabel's collection of U-boats, of which she seems to know everything, doing whatever they can to make each other feel better. When Levi finally leaves the apartment again he feels refreshed and hopeful, and the long walk to the Commander's home seems to take him no time at all.

After he's placed three loud knocks on the door, Levi waits patiently for the man to answer and keeps waiting until he's stepped aside before making his way in. He gives the man a once over, taking in the meticulous cleanliness of his appearance that he always finds so soothing; furthermore, Erwin has taken off the jacket of his uniform again, and though Levi doubts he has done it for his sake, he appreciates the gesture nonetheless. He answers the man's greeting with a habitual grunt, walking past him to get started on the tea only to have him stop him gently by his arm.

"You've hurt yourself," the man notes, thick brows furrowed as he looks over Levi's face.

"It's nothing," Levi tells him, feeling that odd warmth of his hand through the light fabric of his shirt. "The gun kicked back harder than I thought. I'll be more careful next time."

Erwin nods his approval, his eyes still on the bruise, his hand lingering on Levi's arm until he draws it back suddenly, like only now realising he's left it there. He turns away and clears his throat, making Levi wonder about the apparent embarrassment. He walks into the kitchen ahead of Erwin, deciding firmly that talking about it would only help in making the situation more uncomfortable.

"I'd like a word before you get working," Erwin says just as Levi pulls a pot from the cupboard; he's taken a seat by the kitchen table and Levi joins him swiftly after putting the kettle on. "You must have gathered by now that your mission with Mike was unsuccessful. The attempted sabotage on the engine has been discovered and is being repaired as we speak."

Levi can't help frowning; something about Erwin's tone seems likely to dispel Levi's good mood, which has only grown better since he arrived. "I thought as much," he replies, resisting that exasperation that the thought carries. "Is there anything more I can do?"

The man seems hesitant for a moment. "The fixing of the engine seems to be taking longer than was expected," he explains calmly. "There is a chance to inflict further damage to the train while it's still rendered useless."

Levi feels like groaning as he hears it. "You mean I need to go back with Mike and do it all over again?"

"I'm afraid Mike is otherwise occupied. On this mission you'd be joining me."

To Levi Erwin's words are a comfort, however small, and hearing them it doesn't take him long to decide. "When?"

The man's lips spread to a smile. "Thursday night."

Levi nods curtly. "Let's hope the weather's not as fucking terrible. It took me three days to get the stench of sweat off my clothes."

"I suppose it was rather warm that night," Erwin agrees, his tone growing a touch hesitant as he continues, eyeing Levi's bruises again, "Mike mentioned you had some trouble keeping up with him."

"Fucking ogre in his seven-league boots," Levi mutters a response. "Is it any wonder when his legs are as long as my entire fucking body?"

Erwin lets out a quiet laugh. "It's been a while since I heard that story," he says. "I suppose it's not only fitting considering how tall Mike is. After all, if he's the Ogre then you must be Little Poucet."

"Guess that means I'll live happily ever after," Levi says and scoffs.

"I certainly hope so," the man agrees, still smiling.

Levi stares at Erwin for a few seconds before turning his gaze on the kitchen cupboards; on some rational level he knows that by now he shouldn't find Erwin's kindness neither surprising nor unsettling, but the feelings still surge in him at moments like this and as usual Levi can't think of anything to say. The other man seems to sense his confusion and changes the subject.

"I thought I'd give a fair warning – I'm entertaining tonight," he tells Levi, to whom the words don't register.

"Entertaining?" he asks back, making Erwin nod.

"I'm having some people over. Just a small get together, nothing to make a fuss about."

"And you want me to leave before then," Levi guesses as the water boils and he hurries over to the stove.

"You can stay as long as you like," the man corrects him. "To be honest, some of my guests might be quite curious to see my famous male housekeeper."

Levi snorts as he pours the hot water into the teapot before stirring in the tea leaves. "Maybe I should join the circus, start making some money off of it."

"I'd give you a raise to keep you," Erwin says, half-jokingly it seems as Levi carries the pot and two cups to the table and sits down again.

"I guess I'll be calling you Herr Sturmbannführer once they get here," he muses, frowning at the thought and leaving the man's comment unacknowledged.

"I suppose you'll have to," Erwin agrees and sighs. "And I suppose I'll call you Lukas, not Levi."

There's that softness in the way the man says his name that makes Levi hurry over to the ice box in a useless attempt to ignore it; he grabs a bottle of milk before returning to the table and fights all troubling thoughts toward the back of his mind as he sits down again. Across the table the man has leaned back in his chair and raised his arms above his head before yawning widely and Levi can see the curves of the muscles on his arms as they stretch the fabric of his shirt.

"I must say I'm not much in the mood for a party," Erwin admits as Levi pours out the tea.

"Why are you having one then?"

"It's the sort of thing people expect," the man replies, sounding suddenly weary. "I'm sure I don't need to teach you about the importance of keeping up appearances."

Levi grunts a reply and sips at his tea as a comfortable silence fills the kitchen and that flavour of bergamot reminds Levi suddenly of the morning when he woke up on the sofa in the sitting room not two weeks ago. The early hours were so calm that for a long while he just lay still listening to the muffled sounds of the Commander going through his routine of washing and shaving, dressing and making his bed on the other side of the door that separated them. The man said his name then as well, emerging into the room with a soft wish of good morning, and to Levi it sounded like he was still getting used to the feel of it in his mouth, like he was saying it to make it a habit, though he wonders now how much of that was simply wishful thinking. The silence around the table during breakfast was similar to this, too: uncomplicated, born out of both of them being contented having nothing to say.

After tea Levi gets to work, moving swiftly through his usual chores around the apartment starting from the kitchen, where he washes the dishes and cleans the counters, sweeps and scrubs the floors and airs out the room while doing a more thorough clean-up in the pantry. Erwin's not on his typewriter today – Levi can tell from the absence of clicking and crunching – and when he moves on to the sitting room he finds the man fast asleep on the sofa, a book resting open on his chest, rising and falling with the deep breaths he takes. For a moment Levi is mesmerised by that movement; he's never seen the Commander sleeping before and there's something about the peacefulness of his expression that makes Levi decide against waking him.

He takes advantage of the solitude and visits the bathroom before cleaning the sitting room as soundlessly as he can for the next thirty minutes, but when it gets to six o'clock he starts to wonder when Erwin's guests might be arriving, and whether he'll be expected to let them in should the man still be sleeping. He puts his duster down on the coffee table and kneels by the sofa, placing a gentle hand on Erwin's shoulder and as soon as he does the man wakes, making to clutch Levi's arm but stopping himself when he realises who has woken him up.

"I thought you'd want to get up before your guests get here," Levi tells him, standing up. "It's six o'clock already."

"Yes, well," Erwin mutters as he pulls his body upright and rubs at his face. "Could you draw me a bath if you're not too busy? I'm not feeling very presentable."

“Of course, Herr Sturmbannführer,” Levi replies sardonically. “Would that be all, Herr Sturmbannführer?”

Erwin gives him a tired look as he pushes himself up from the sofa. “Behave yourself,” he simply orders as Levi sneers on his way to the bathroom. He exits into the bedroom a few minutes later to let the man know his bath is waiting.

“Thank you, Levi,” Erwin says as he places his cufflinks on the dresser next to his wristwatch before starting to unbutton his shirt.

Levi grunts and walks past him to pull the covers off the bed to change the sheets. “You can leave your clothes on the floor. I’ll go downstairs to do some laundry in a little while.”

The man laughs quietly. “Most people would leave the room while others are undressing,” he points out needlessly as he lets the shirt fall by his feet, and Levi remembers the way the man’s eyes were fixed on the wall of the bathroom stall when he was fighting to keep the uniform trousers from sliding down to his ankles.

“You can get naked in the bathroom if you’re feeling shy. I can just as easily get your clothes from there,” Levi replies, yanking the pillowcases off the pillows and throwing them on top of the shirt.

Erwin says nothing further and Levi makes sure to keep his eyes on the bed until the man has closed the bathroom door behind himself; he can hear the man relieving himself, and when he finally steps into the tub Levi can even hear the heavy, satisfied sigh he lets out. As he sorts through the rest of the laundry he can’t help thinking enviously of soaking his body in that hot, soothing water instead and he wonders whether he would have time to bathe when next he comes over; the last time he bathed in the Commander’s tub was far from ideal, after all. When Levi picks up the man’s clothes from the floor and throws them into the laundry basket he can still feel the lingering warmth on them and he wonders whether they’d be infused with that scent of sleep should he smell them.

He finishes changing the sheets, filling the room with that faint fragrance of lavender as he makes the bed again and lays out clean clothes for Erwin before leaving the room; he can hear the man splashing out of the tub. He returns to the kitchen to iron one of Erwin’s collar shirts, though upon closer examination he can’t find much wrong with it. When he re-enters the bedroom, the man is standing in front of the mirror wearing an undershirt and grey uniform trousers; when Levi looks down and sees those large, bare feet against the wooden floor he can’t help a shiver running down his spine. Neither of them says anything as Levi helps Erwin into the shirt.

“I know I’ve been quite demanding of your time already today,” the man says as he buttons up, “but could you possibly clean my boots? Just a quick sprucing up will do, there’s no need to shine them or anything.”

Levi grunts and sets to work, measuring the size of the boot with his eyes as he cleans it; were he to pull it on, it would easily reach his knee when on Erwin it barely covers two thirds of his shin. By the time Levi’s finished brushing off the dust and dry mud, the man is donning a neck tie and a jacket and is fighting to get the silver swastika cufflinks in place.

“Let me,” Levi tells him, seizing the right sleeve of the shirt and easing the cufflink through the buttonholes; he can feel his fingers brushing against the smooth skin on Erwin’s wrist before he moves on to the next one. Levi wonders how he’s not noticed the size of the man’s hands before as his eyes look over the light dusting of downy blond hair on his long fingers; his own nearly lose their grip on the cufflink for a second before he manages to secure it in place.

“Thank you,” Erwin mutters quietly, his voice even lower than usual, before sitting down heavily on the bed to pull on his socks and boots. Without fully knowing why, Levi takes a seat next to him.

“Do you often wear normal clothes?” he asks Erwin, his thoughts on the suit he wore that night as the man hums for a moment before replying.

“Sometimes,” he says, letting his other foot fall against the floor. “I find this is easier, however.”

“How?”

Erwin shrugs. “One good thing about uniforms is that one never has to go through the trouble of deciding what to wear,” he explains briefly, looking at Levi who snorts.

“Very vain about that stuff then, are you?” he asks now, making Erwin utter a laugh.

“Would it surprise you to hear that I used to be?” he asks Levi back.

“I guess rich people can afford it,” Levi replies almost indifferently.

“And what makes you think I’m rich?”

“It’s just how you are,” Levi tells him curtly, only now realising he’s thought this all along. “You’re used to people doing things for you. So either you’ve been rich enough to afford that or you’ve been married for a long time.”

Erwin nods wordlessly, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Like I said before, you’re good at reading people,” he says, leaving Levi wondering which alternative he’s talking about, but hesitant to ask. The man gets up from the bed and steps in front of the mirror again to part and comb his hair; when he’s finished he turns back to Levi, but before he has a chance to say anything there’s a loud knock on the door.

“Perhaps you could get some tea ready?” he says instead before marching out of the room to answer the door.

Levi walks swiftly into the kitchen to hurry himself with boiling water and setting cups on a tray. He can hear male voices carrying in from the sitting room as the guests take their seats and he peers into it quickly to count the number of cups he’ll need from the grey uniforms gathered around the coffee table. He waits impatiently for the kettle to boil, feeling uneasy even with Erwin in the next room as he listens to the muffled conversation, thinking how this is precisely the sort of situation he set out to avoid when starting his life in hiding. While the

tea brews he walks nervously back and forth from the pot to the stove, counting the stripes on the rug to keep his mind busy.

When he finally exits the kitchen with the tray, Levi has managed to suppress the worst of his uneasiness, though the sight of five SS-officers still makes his instincts warn him to run as far and fast as he can from the room. Instead he walks further in to the sitting room and lays the tea on the coffee table just as one of the men addresses Erwin.

“It’s looking a bit empty in here,” he says, looking around the room appraisingly. “Did you sell some furniture?”

The question is clearly meant as a comment on the asceticism of the space for everyone around the table chuckles, Erwin included.

“No, but your wife came by last week,” he says, his face entirely expressionless, “and she insisted I give her every piece of furniture we made love on.”

The chuckles around the table turn into roars of laughter, and the loudest of the men is the one who has talked last. Levi lifts the tea pot and cups off the tray slowly and carefully, concentrating on the task to keep any expression off his face.

“I even had to go out and buy a new bed and sofa,” Erwin goes on, making everyone laugh again. “So really you owe me 200 Reichsmarks.”

The man whose wife Erwin is referring to is now wiping tears from his eyes, the gurgling guffawing turning into wheezy cackling; he’s heavy-built and balding with the sort of roundness that comes from years of heavy drinking, and as everyone’s attention is on him he starts reaching into the breast pocket of his uniform jacket.

“Will you take a check?” he asks, dissolving into another fit of laughter at that. “Should I pay you some extra for keeping my wife so happy?”

Erwin shakes his head jerkily. “Even I can’t keep your wife happy, Rolf,” he replies; another wave of hilarity ensues until they all fall into coughing and lighting their cigarettes, and Erwin turns to Levi saying, “There’s some cake in the pantry.”

“We’re having tea?” Rolf booms from his place in an armchair just as Levi exits into the kitchen. “What are we, women? Bring out the good stuff!”

Levi finds the bundt cake and pops it onto a plate before slicing it into twelve equally-sized pieces, weighing the knife in his hand absent-mindedly as the situation flashes through his mind again. He has wondered before how Erwin has been able to convince everyone he really is a Nazi, but with what he just witnessed Levi’s not wondering anymore; before today he would never have been able to imagine the man making jokes like that and laughing along with others at something so tasteless, funny or not. The way he spoke was different too, there was no softness left in his voice and to Levi he sounded much more akin to Krieger than he’d ever be comfortable admitting to himself. Just as he’s about to push the knife into his pocket, Levi throws it in the sink instead, grabbing the plateful of cake and walking back into the sitting room. As he places it onto the coffee table, one of the men addresses him.

“So you’re the housekeeper?” he asks and they all turn their eyes on Levi, who nods curtly.

“Yes,” he barely says before turning to Erwin. “Do you need anything else, Herr Sturmbannführer?”

“Listen to this, now!” Rolf exclaims before Erwin can get a word in. “Herr Sturmbannführer! Maybe you were wrong, Erwin. Seems to me like he’d be a good fit for the army.”

“You think an honest, hard-working German man can’t learn to properly address his superiors?” Erwin replies, sounding dismayed. “Shit, even a Jew can learn that. And I’m damn well not about to have people I’ve hired call me anything else.”

“True, true,” one of the men says as Levi fights the urge to grit his teeth.

“Is there something more important you need to do?” Erwin asks him now, looking almost annoyed.

“The laundry, Herr Sturmbannführer,” Levi replies, keeping his face as impassive as his voice.

“Oh, right.” The man waves his hand at Levi dismissively. “Sure. Go.”

As Levi enters the bedroom he makes sure to close the door behind himself, walking quickly to the washstand and taking the razor out of the little drawer in which he knows Erwin to keep it. He places it in his pocket decisively before grabbing the laundry basket and leaving the apartment through the bathroom, descending the stairs into the laundry room in the basement. He spends the next two hours cleaning the Commander’s clothes and sheets so vigorously that he’s surprised when he doesn’t find holes in the fabrics when he finally hangs them all to dry in the adjoining room. There isn’t a single part of Levi that wants to return upstairs and he takes much longer than usually starching Erwin’s shirts before piling them all in the basket to take them back to the apartment to dry in hangers in the bathroom.

Levi hears the voice as soon as he steps into the apartment and recognises it instantly, though he’s only heard it once before. It carried out from the sitting room that time too, that delightful singsong tone, unmistakable even in those four words: *Who was that, darling?* As the woman’s laughter echoes in the hallway, Levi feels his curiosity awakening; the sound brings to his mind the fragment of a letter he found, and he wonders whether this woman is the intended recipient, the one who calls the Commander hers. As the other members of the party join her in laughing, Levi makes sure the razor is still safely in his pocket and goes into the bathroom to hang up the shirts.

When he walks into the sitting room, Levi stays by the decorative double doors for a moment to assess the situation. The woman is the only one to have joined the group since Levi left, but one of the men he remembers from before is missing, a weasel-y looking officer with a moustache that made him think about Krieger. On the table there’s a half-empty bottle of clear liquor and five schnapps glasses which, judging by the reddened cheeks of the company, have been filled and emptied several times in Levi’s absence.

“The laundry’s done, Herr Sturmbannführer,” Levi speaks out as soon as the laughing and talking die down enough.

Everyone turns to look at him, but Levi himself is only aware of the woman, whose head whips around toward him as soon as the first word is out of his mouth. Levi can see she’s very attractive in the way wealthy people often are: her dark brown hair is styled in eerily symmetrical curls held in place above her ears by two simple silver hair clips to accentuate the oval shape of her face which is filled with curiosity she’s not attempting to hide. Her lips form a delicate red circle as she eyes Levi inquisitively.

“Oh, but Erwin!” she exclaims wildly. “This must be the famous housekeeper we’ve heard so much about!”

Erwin, who’s turned to look at Levi along with the rest, grunts dully and gets back to lighting his cigarette. “Sure. That’s him,” he barely mutters and the woman gives him an impatient look.

“How quaint,” she voices, making Levi frown. “D’you know, I’ve never heard of anyone having a man for a housekeeper. You must join us and tell us your tale!”

“Lilian,” one of the men cuts in, sounding almost scolding. “He’s the help.”

“Oh, but that is so English of you!” she exclaims, slapping the man’s knee. “Surely he’s a person like the rest of us, and I for one am very interested in what he has to say.”

“Speaking of the English,” another officer points out, “don’t they have male servants?”

“And what they do with them is anyone’s guess,” Erwin mutters as he offers a cigarette to Rolf, who lets out a bellow of laughter.

“Don’t be so vulgar, Erwin!” Lilian reprimands him gently, gesturing enthusiastically with her hand for Levi to join them.

He takes a few reluctant steps toward the sofa before Erwin speaks out.

“Wait a minute,” he snaps, turning to look at Levi sluggishly and pointing his right index finger at his face. “Have you done everything you’re supposed to?”

Levi meets the man’s eyes impassively, trying to look for any sign of the person he was just a few hours ago but finding nothing; his expression seems to be split between equal measures of disinterest and irritation, which makes the lines on his face deeper and more pronounced. Levi can’t help but feel impressed at how well Erwin is able to transform from his real self, though it also fills him with apprehension and makes him feel for the weight of the blade in his pocket again.

“Yes, Herr Sturmbannführer,” Levi replies obediently.

“Even the laundry?”

Levi resists the urge to roll his eyes. “I just finished, Herr Sturmbannführer.”

“And you’ve ironed my shirts?” Erwin asks now, casting off the burnt tip of his cigarette.

“They’re still drying, Herr Sturmbannführer.”

“I want you to iron them before you leave tonight,” he tells Levi, looking even more dismayed as he falls quiet, taking a long drag of his smoke. “So while you wait for the shirts to dry I guess you can sit down for one drink. Go get yourself a glass from the kitchen.”

“Thank you, Herr Sturmbannführer,” Levi replies; keeping the mocking tone out of his voice is nearly impossible.

“Another round?” Lilian asks and is greeted by a general consensus as Levi walks into the kitchen for another schnapps glass, which the woman fills as soon as he sits down on the sofa. “So, tell us. How does a young man such as yourself end up doing domestic work?”

Levi sips at his drink tentatively, deciding immediately that the liquid would be better suited for cleaning ink stains out of furniture than for human consumption. He glances at Erwin as the man pours the contents of his glass down his throat without so much as blinking and thinks back to the days when he was still able to drink like that. It’s been years since Levi has had anything stronger than watered down wine, and he doesn’t trust himself to stay even remotely sober should he assume the sort of pace the others are keeping.

“There aren’t a lot of options out there, for someone like me,” Levi explains briefly, “and I mean no offence but I think the only reason Herr Sturmbannführer hired me is because I charge a lot less than anyone else would.”

Everyone laughs and even Erwin grins, shrugging dismissively. “I’m careful with money,” he utters defensively.

“You are a cheapskate, Erwin, there’s no other word for it,” Lilian corrects him as she places a cigarette onto an ivory holder and has the officer sitting next to her light it.

“If they’d put you in charge of supplies our boys would’ve been given one shoe each and told to share,” Rolf jokes and they all laugh again, all except Levi, though he knows he should.

“And everyone knows that story of how you angered Generalleutnant Osterhaus by demanding he pay for his share of a dinner once,” Lilian recounts, her voice scolding. “You should know from spending time with me that rich people don’t like to talk about money and we certainly don’t like to be reminded about not spending it.”

Erwin spreads his arms apologetically. “What can I say? I have learned my lesson.”

“I heard you sent him some kind of a package a few weeks ago,” one of the officers seems to suddenly remember, making Levi nearly spill his drink. “I was sure the person who told it to me had it wrong, but then I heard the same thing from someone else.”

Levi glances at Erwin, who looks equally embarrassed and annoyed. “Just a peace offering that clearly didn’t do its job,” he explains evasively, and the men around the table leave it at that.

“But where were we? Ah, yes! Domestic work,” Lilian says now, turning to Levi again. “Really, ironing shirts? I wouldn’t even know where to start if someone told me to iron a shirt! And my husband, I don’t think he could name an iron should he ever happen across one.”

“My mother was often ill when I was growing up,” Levi lies. “I was an only child so she taught me how to take care of things for the times when she couldn’t.”

Lilian lifts a hand to her chest and nods sympathetically. “I think we should make a toast,” she declares, turning suddenly back toward the table and lifting the bottle, “to a future where every little boy would be so helpful to his mother.”

She fills all of their glasses, even tops up Levi’s barely touched one, and they raise them more to please her than anything else, or so it seems to Levi who takes a small gulp of the liquid and has to clear his throat after the burning sensation sets in. Rolf burps noisily and excuses himself to the bathroom, making Levi cringe internally; he’d rather not have any one of them near the place.

“We should have some music!” Lilian seems to realise all of a sudden. “You have a record player, don’t you, Erwin?”

The man gets to his feet arduously and walks to the small cupboard in the corner, pulling out a small gramophone and setting it up on the tabletop. “What do you want to listen to?” he asks the woman, who doesn’t hesitate for a moment.

“Play *Por Una Cabeza*,” she commands, her brown eyes twinkling with excitement. “I know you have that one.”

“You surprise me again, Lilian,” one of the other men says. “If I was being English before then I can say you’re being very un-German yourself right now!”

“Un-German,” Lilian repeats, waving her hand like swatting off the comment. “I’ll tell you the same thing I told Herr Goebbels when I ran into him a few weeks ago: Wagner is all well and good, but for all his virtues one cannot dance to his music.”

She stands up just as Erwin has finished putting on the record, walking over to him and taking his hands in hers. He greets the gesture without hesitation, leading her to a tango much more gracefully than Levi would’ve thought possible for a man of his build. He gulps down the rest of his drink as he watches them, her painted mouth curved into a wide smile that shows the pearly white of her teeth, his expression growing softer than Levi’s seen it since the guests arrived. Their bodies are pressed together tightly, Erwin’s large hands are keeping her in place, wrinkling the shiny fabric of her dress as he pulls her closer. Levi can feel the alcohol warming his cheeks as the woman brings her lips to Erwin’s ear to whisper something to him, something that makes them both smile more widely.

“You must be a brave woman,” the officer tells Lilian, “saying something like that about Wagner to Goebbels himself.”

Lilian merely laughs. “He’s such a strange little man,” she exclaims. “And such strange ideas! To think about banning *Lili Marlene*...” She looks at them, pouting her lips in disapproval and shaking her head.

At that moment Rolf returns from the bathroom, his hands still struggling with the buckle of his belt. “What in the devil is this?” he bellows upon seeing the dancing couple. “Is this the so-called indecency I’ve been reading so much about?”

“You should know Herr Sturmbannführer is not capable of anything that could be called indecent,” Lilian tells him, clearly not meaning a word she says.

Rolf scoffs loudly as his body slumps back into the armchair. “Ha! He’s playing the gentleman now, but you should’ve heard the jokes he made about my wife earlier!”

Lilian pretends confusion as she turns to look at the rest of them again. “My God, is he still not used to that?” she whispers very loudly, making Rolf burst into another fit of laughter along with the two officers.

Erwin and Lilian finish their dance as they all watch on, after which they have another round. Levi finishes his drink along with the rest of them, not caring to examine what it is that’s making him act so recklessly – though how reckless it is is debatable, since no one seems to be paying any attention to him. They listen to a few more records, popular songs from a few years ago and sing along to them drunkenly; Levi’s eyes follow Erwin as he lights another cigarette before joining in on the chorus of *Lili Marlene*, his low voice still recognisable even in the racket they’re making.

After a few more rounds they all seem to calm down, slouching on their seats tiredly as Lilian blows smoke rings over the table, still quietly humming to herself though everyone else has fallen silent. Levi’s limbs feel as heavy as his eyelids as he struggles to focus his gaze on something, the liquor having dulled his senses and worn out his body. The empty bottle lies on its side next to a littered ashtray on the coffee table, across which Rolf is pouring out the last drops from his glass. Levi looks over at Erwin, whose eyes are only half-open but following Lilian’s every move, a fact of which she seems very aware, judging by the smile playing on her lips.

“Did you hear about that thing with the train?” Rolf suddenly says, making them all look up; even Erwin glances at him before turning his gaze back on Lilian. Levi tries to make sure to keep his own expression as blank as it was before, but he has a terrible feeling that he isn’t entirely in control of his face any more.

“What thing with the train?” Lilian asks lazily. She has thrown her legs over the other armrest of the chair and is directing her words to the ceiling.

“Someone tried to sabotage a supply train a few nights ago,” one of the other officers explains quietly. “Tried tampering with the engine. In the worst case it would’ve blown up and taken most of the supplies, not to mention valuable lives, with it.”

Levi fights the urge to look at Erwin as he speaks up. “Did they catch whoever tried it yet?”

“No,” Rolf says and burps, “but they will. They say the other one was very tall, and the other one was short, like a woman or a child. A pair like that won’t go unnoticed for long.”

Erwin grunts in agreement as Levi pushes his hands in his pockets and plants his feet firmly yet discreetly against the wooden floor, trying to hang on to the words “woman or a child” for comfort. He can feel the smooth handle of the razor against his palm, but instead of calming him it only manages to add to his agitation.

“Where was the train headed?” Lilian asks, sounding almost absent-minded as she smokes the last of her cigarette before handing it to the man next to her, who puts it out for her.

“East,” Rolf tells her, “but they’re changing the direction now as a diversion.”

“Oh,” she voices, sounding very disappointed. “It could have taken some new socks to my Wolfgang.”

“The last thing your husband needs right now are new socks,” the man sitting next to her says. “What he needs are more men. Have they started taking people from your department yet, Erwin?”

The man grunts in agreement again without turning his eyes away from Lilian.

“When will you go?” she asks him quietly, but they all hear her words nonetheless.

“Any day now,” he replies, his voice as emotionless as his face.

It takes Levi several seconds to notice he’s tightened his hold around the handle of the razor and several more to realise how badly he needs the toilet. He excuses himself though he’s not sure whether any of them remember he’s still there, Erwin included, and locks himself into the bathroom, sitting down on the seat and pressing the palms of his hands tightly against his eyelids. His head feels heavy, everything seems out of focus, and he doesn’t know how to process Erwin’s words or behaviour, can’t tell where this Erwin ends and the other one begins any more. Was it a lie, what he told Lilian, or would he continue this pretense all the way to the front lines of battle? And what would happen to Levi then?

There are too many things that don’t make sense so Levi concentrates on emptying his bladder, the only uncomplicated thing he can think of at that moment. He can hear the guests taking their leave behind the door, someone tries the handle but doesn’t knock, perhaps thinking it just as well to take a piss on the street outside the building. There’s a moment of confusion during which they all try to figure out which jacket belongs to whom and Levi wonders how anyone would think these men to be part of any master race.

When Levi walks out after washing his hands, he catches one of the officers showing Rolf a cigarette case, an engraved silver thing that looks to Levi more expensive than anything he’s ever held let alone owned during his lifetime.

“Found it when I was last in Poland,” the officer tells Rolf, who asks about the previous owner. The man whistles and points up toward the ceiling, making Rolf guffaw loudly.

“You’re lucky some Jew had the same initials as you,” he remarks amusedly before walking out the door.

Perhaps it’s the drunken state he’s in, but Levi feels no rage after hearing those words. All he feels is profound sadness, like the weight of all the things no one wanted to believe were happening had suddenly fallen on him. He remembers his uncle who, terrible though he was as a parent, was still the only thing Levi could call family until Farlan and Isabel came along. He thinks of the single letter he received after Kenny was taken away, a rambling note listing nothing but mundanities about how the work was hard but they were all treated well and given plenty to eat. It’s the ending Levi remembers best, however, a single sentence encouraging Levi to tell their neighbour he was right about Hitler, a few simple words that told Levi not to believe a word of the things Kenny had written before. Levi burned the letter along with everything else before he left Berlin and he can’t remember having thought about it since, but at this moment he regrets having destroyed it.

He walks into the sitting room, not realising to stop until his eyes meet two figures instead of one. Lilian and Erwin are standing by the bookshelf, bodies close, her hand pressed gently against his cheek; it looks to Levi as if he’s leaning against the touch, like he’s trying to make it into something more than it is. When she notices Levi, Lilian lowers her hand and smiles at him politely, knowing better than to be startled by the presence of a mere housekeeper.

“Good night,” she wishes him as she walks past, turning back by the double doors one last time before leaving the apartment.

“Is she gone?” Erwin whispers a few seconds after he hears the door close and, like taking some cue from Levi’s nod, sinks into an armchair and sighs.

Levi follows his example more hesitantly, sitting down on his usual spot on the edge of the sofa. He follows Erwin as he pulls off his boots before stretching out his long legs and extending his feet; he seems more exhausted to Levi than he’s ever done before. The usual sharpness of his gaze is gone and Levi doubts whether he’d be able to take even him on in a fight, being in the state he’s in. He pinches the bridge of his nose and yawns widely.

“I apologise for my crudeness tonight,” Erwin tells him quietly. “Sadly not all of my acquaintances are as refined as you.”

Levi scoffs loudly; there is not a chance in hell he could find anyone who knows him who would ever describe him as ‘refined’, but he doesn’t correct the man – clearly he likes giving these compliments.

“I can see you find that amusing,” the man goes on, “but I find it’s an appropriate word. You have no illusions about the world, you’re not childish like that, but you wish no harm on anyone. That is a rare and refined combination in people.”

Levi wonders whether he should say thank you, but it seems ridiculous and he stays quiet instead. Though his mind seems full to bursting, there’s nothing he particularly wants to point out or find out the answer to. The evening has been so strange and he feels so tired and confused he barely knows how to talk to Erwin; his drunken brain seems to still be struggling

with making the distinction between this person who thinks Levi is rare and refined and the other who thinks he's barely worth a glance.

"I was wondering," Levi says to change the subject, "whether there's been trouble because of the package."

He feels a kind of dread, remembering the night and the disappointment in Erwin's voice when he told him he'd given his name as the sender. The mistake has bothered him ever since as he's relived the mission before falling asleep, going over every blunder and oversight almost obsessively; the trouble with the hat, forgetting his name – he'd even pissed in public. Though he's told himself over and over to learn from the lapses, he can't help feeling disappointed in himself.

"Nothing yet," Erwin tells him, his tone neutral, "though I suppose it's only a matter of time."

"What was in that package?" Levi asks now, another thing he's been obsessing over.

The man looks over at him in silence for a long time, his blue eyes dark under knitted brows. "Several years ago certain things came to my attention regarding Generalleutnant Osterhaus," Erwin explains to him slowly. "In the past I have used that knowledge to my advantage more often than once."

"What is it then?" Levi goes on. "What do you know?"

"Osterhaus has been falsifying the documents of certain military personnel," Erwin tells him. "He has listed several officers as being in active duty, though it's been years since any of them have been anywhere near the front. What I sent him were the records of the SS-officers who have, to my knowledge, participated in this fraud."

"Why?"

Erwin takes a moment to consider. "I have sent him similar packages before, anonymously of course. This way I've been able to extort some information from him."

"And now that he knows who sent them?" Levi asks, though he's dreading the answer.

"Well," the man replies, uttering a quiet laugh. "I'd imagine he's been quite busy breaking the deals he's made before. After he's severed the ties I suspect he'll come after me, free from the fear I could get evidence to prove my accusations against him to be true."

"What do you mean, he'll come after you?"

"The information I have been gathering from him has been rather particular in nature," Erwin says. "He'll come to his own conclusions before long, I'm sure, but considering the state of things he might like to take a while to weigh out his alternatives and reach the best one. It'll be a match between self-preservation and patriotism, should it come to that, I have no doubt."

"Fuck," Levi swears under his breath. "You know, I'm really—"

“Please, there is no need for apologies,” the man speaks out, fingers clumsily fighting the cufflinks off his shirt, “And before I forget, we need to cancel Thursday.”

“The mission?” Levi asks immediately, feeling a pang of disappointment, but Erwin shakes his head.

“The mission will go on as planned,” he says. “I meant you won’t be able to come work for me on that day, that’s all.”

Levi can feel his eyebrows rising; the reason for the cancellation is so obvious it doesn’t escape even him. “Right,” he replies and they say nothing more about it.

“I’m afraid I’ve been terribly selfish tonight,” Erwin tells Levi, making him frown. “I feel I ought to have sent you home when Lilian asked you to join us.”

“You probably should have,” Levi agrees, keeping his eyes on Erwin even when he lowers his gaze.

“Something about your presence has made tonight easier for me to bear,” the man goes on with a look of confusion on his features, like feeling this way is a puzzle he’s trying to solve. “I suppose you remind me of the moments when I don’t need to pretend to be someone I’m not.”

Levi nods slowly without speaking; that feeling Erwin has expressed is not foreign to him and he doesn’t need to struggle to understand it. He thinks about Isabel and Farlan, but something about the comparison doesn’t feel right and after a moment’s consideration he realises what: even now, with everything they’ve been through together, everything he’s seen them conquer, Levi still feels he needs to be strong for their sake, to keep some parts of himself hidden so they will feel safer. For whatever reason he doesn’t fear for Erwin’s life, doesn’t feel like any part of it is his responsibility. The man’s words are also a confirmation to the part of his brain that’s still fighting to decide which Erwin is the real one.

“Sometimes I fear I’ll forget,” Erwin says quietly, and something about the absent look in his eyes makes Levi wonder whether he’s talking more to himself.

The words follow Levi all the way to his own bed where he falls next to Farlan, feeling nearly as exhausted as he did coming back from that useless mission with Mike. He thinks about that fragment of the letter he found, about the loneliness the Commander talked about and as he presses his face against the nape of Farlan’s neck, he wishes the letter was meant for Lilian, wishes that Erwin has someone who understands him.

“Have you been drinking?” Farlan asks him sleepily.

“Don’t worry,” Levi tells him soothingly. “Just go back to sleep.”

WARNINGS

- foul language

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I already mentioned this in several replies to comments for chapter 5, but chapters 5 and 6 were originally supposed to be just one chapter. After I decided to write out the entire party scene in chapter 5, however, I realised that the chapter would have ended up being enormously long and I decided to cut it in half. This might explain why there aren't so many things happening especially in chapter six but hopefully it will make you excited for what's to come. Chapter 7 will be out on November 20th.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi greets the following day with a loud groan and a headache pressing down on his temples, sitting up in a bed that seems considerably less steady than it was when he fell asleep on it. He presses his hands against his face and sighs, trying to bring the details of the previous night into focus. He remembers Lilian's laughter and the dance she shared with Erwin and their conversation after she left, the burn of dread and shame raised by the talk of Osterhaus. Even now Levi cringes at the thought as he struggles onto his feet and pulls on his clothes from the previous day to get to the communal bathroom. When he pushes his hands into his pockets, his fingers close around the razor he took from the drawer of Erwin's washstand and he traces the handle with his thumb as he enters the dingy room.

He takes a piss and washes his hands, staring at his reflection in the mirror, the cuts and bruises still bright on his face. There's a shadow of stubble that makes his skin seem greyer than it actually is, adding to the feeling of untidiness that grates on his nerves even now. As he fills the basin with warm water after a quick bath, Levi takes the razor out of his pocket again, exposing the blade and running his finger along the edge, imagining how it would slide across the Commander's cheek where Lilian pressed her hand – that gentle, familiar touch. Levi lifts the steel against his skin and imitates the picture in his mind quickly with one smooth motion before putting the razor hurriedly back to where he found it, feeling like he's done something improper by using it.

When he sits down at the kitchen table later, it seems to him as though Farlan is doing his best to bang the pots and skillets against every piece of furniture in the room as loudly as possible while giving him unimpressed looks from behind the droopy strand of hair that falls over his eyes. Levi sighs tiredly and empties a glass of water with a few large gulps just to have the other man snatch it out of his hand to get it in the sink with the rest of the dishes.

“What the fuck is the matter with you?” Levi snaps as a few drops of water fall on his shirt.

Farlan doesn't say anything, simply returns to the chores, making a show of doing many that he would usually leave to Levi. “You didn't bring back any food yesterday,” he finally states sullenly without giving Levi so much as a glance as he folds away the clothes hanging above the stove.

“I must've forgotten,” Levi mutters, only now realising he came back empty-handed the night before.

“That's rather a strange thing to forget, isn't it?” Farlan asks him with an edge to his voice. “For the both of you.”

Levi fights the urge to roll his eyes as he stares at the back of Farlan's head. “We'd both been drinking,” he explains briefly.

“Believe it or not, I had actually gathered that much,” the man tells him, placing some clean dry tea towels into a cupboard, “but due to your memory being like a sieve, we have nothing to eat for dinner today.”

Levi suppresses a groan as he thinks about leaving the apartment with the headache that feels like a tight hoop has been fitted around his skull. “What about the dried peas? Why don't you just make a soup out of those?”

“Because we ate them last week,” Farlan says. “I know it must be difficult to keep track of what goes on in this apartment when you're actually never here.”

“Why don't you just take care of it then?” Levi snaps at the other man; the hurt on his face makes him regret the statement instantly, though still much less than it usually would.

Farlan turns back toward the sink though it's empty, leaning his hands against the porcelain rim and letting out a whimper-y sigh that seems more than a little exaggerated to Levi. “You know I can't just—”

“I know,” Levi interrupts him sharply not to hear all that again. “I'll go out and get something.”

Farlan snuffles quietly before turning around and muttering a quick ‘thank you’ and as Levi exits the apartment he can't help feeling like he'd rather be anywhere else right now. He can't bring himself to ignore the change in the man's behaviour over the past couple of months, nor can he think of anything he could possibly do to make him less disgruntled. It's difficult for him to determine whether Farlan's displeasure is due more to Levi's constant absence or the fact it means the bulk of the responsibilities around the house are left for him to manage now.

When he returns it seems to Levi that Farlan has taken advantage of having the apartment to himself and he finds the man's mood improved to the point of him singing quietly to himself while getting started on dinner. There is an almost dull sense of routine in their evening once Isabel returns: a modest meal, a few games of cards, stories they've told each other time and time again. Levi finds himself prematurely resentful of the following day and tries to go to

bed early to escape it, only succeeding in tossing and turning long after Farlan has drifted off to sleep.

After a poorly slept night Levi makes to leave the apartment directly after breakfast as usual, nearly refusing Isabel's request to join him but changing his mind at the door when he remembers Erwin being otherwise occupied for the evening and realises he'd have to wander around until sometime past eight. He takes the girl to a park instead, buying her a copy of the day's newspaper, which she is disappointed to find empty of stories about U-Boats. They drop into a shop for some groceries and when they finally return to the apartment for dinner, Levi feels grateful for the distraction; even with the thought of the mission that night can't erase the heavy dread that weighs on his mind.

"I'm going to Frau Gernhardt's to watch the children so she can rest for a bit," Isabel tells Levi as they enter the building again, running the short distance to the door on the first floor after Levi gives her a small nod.

He continues up to the third floor swiftly and makes a quick stop at the communal bathroom, eyeing his reflection with a frown as he washes his hands; his hair is starting to get a bit longer than he prefers it, and he makes a mental note to ask Farlan to cut it one of these days. He picks up the shopping and walks to the apartment, jumping at the sight of Farlan who has appeared behind him from the kitchen while he's been locking the door. As soon as Levi sees his ashen face, he knows something is amiss.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks the other man, who shakes his head almost imperceptibly. Levi can feel his breathing growing shallow as his heart starts to race.

"There's someone here to see you," Farlan tells him, his voice much steadier than Levi would have expected from the terrified look on his face. "An SS-officer."

Levi's body reacts before he can form a reasonable thought, growing heavy with a hideous kind of dread until he manages to remind himself the visitor is most likely Erwin, a thought that sends paranoid doubts scuttling across his mind. Levi walks further into the apartment to take a look into the kitchen, his fear turning into indignation when he sees the man with his neatly parted hair, taking a sip of tea from a cup that looks absurdly small in his large hand before meeting Levi's eyes from across the room; there's something apologetic about his smile that succeeds in making Levi even angrier than he was before.

"Good afternoon, Herr Weller," Erwin says, like reminding Levi of the roles they're meant to play.

"Good afternoon, Herr Sturmbannführer," he replies quickly and sourly before walking back to Farlan again, mouthing the words 'It's all right' to calm him down, but the other man's face stays pale and concerned.

"Where's Isabel?" Farlan asks, his voice a touch strained, though Levi can tell he's trying hard to keep it casual.

“At Frau Gernhardt’s,” Levi tells him, hoping that acting as calmly as he can will help the other man relax. “Will you go and join her?”

Farlan glances toward the kitchen and hesitates, like wondering whether he should leave Levi alone with Erwin.

“I told you, everything’s fine,” Levi whispers. “I’ll explain it later.”

Farlan’s eyes narrow as he looks at Levi before walking out of the apartment without saying a word. Levi breathes deeply, trying to quell some of that anger before marching into the kitchen where the man waits, his straight posture making him seem tall even sitting down and somehow too large for the small room. As soon as their eyes meet, Erwin looks as if he’s going to say something, but Levi beats him to it.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing here?” he snaps, lifting the groceries on the table before sitting down on the seat Farlan has left empty; he has poured himself a cup of tea, but clearly he’s not been able to drink a sip of it. “I told you I don’t want you coming here.”

“I know,” Erwin says in a repentant tone that irritates Levi further, “and I apologise. I wouldn’t have resorted to this if I’d had a choice. There was something I needed to discuss with you urgently.”

Levi scowls at him for a few seconds. “What? You took a big dump and it clogged your toilet?”

The man stares at him blankly for a moment before letting out a weary sigh. “No, shockingly that is not what I came here to tell you.”

“Well what is it then?” Levi demands angrily. “And let me warn you it has to be fucking good for me to be fine with you coming over here and scaring the shit out of people.”

Erwin’s expression turns suddenly impassive, reminding Levi of the way he looked when they first met, serious and impersonal, not quite human. The lines by his mouth deepen as his lips press tightly together and his chin juts out. He looks at the same time proud and dejected.

“I needed to let you know that the mission is cancelled,” he barely states, and just as Levi has begun to wonder the cause of this change of mood, Erwin continues. “We agreed I would only come here if there was an imminent threat to your life. Quite frankly I feel insulted that you would think I’d go back on my word so quickly and do something that so blatantly violates your request for privacy.”

Levi stares at the man and frowns, feeling his cheeks heating up with a blush as embarrassment takes over his anger. Erwin is sipping at his tea again, his long fingers wrapped gently around the cup, covering the cheap flower pattern on its side and to Levi he doesn’t look a bit angry, simply pained, like Levi’s mistrust has genuinely hurt him. Levi knows this is a moment for an apology, recognises it in the tense silence, but saying ‘I’m sorry’ is a skill he never learned – Kenny didn’t believe in apologies.

“Why is the mission cancelled?” he asks instead, picking up Farlan’s cup of tea just to give his hands something to do.

Erwin empties his own before replying, “The fault with the engine has been repaired. The train will be departing this evening.”

They fall quiet again and Levi can feel the weight of the words he’s supposed to say; they seem to make the air around him harder to breathe, like he’s drawing in all of Erwin’s sadness with it into his lungs. The man’s blue eyes are directed on the table and he’s turning the cup in his hand absent-mindedly. A few deep lines have appeared between his thick eyebrows and he looks to Levi to be considering something. He looks so weary and heavy-hearted that Levi can feel his guilt multiplying to the point where he feels he must speak out, but just as he’s about to, Erwin breaks the silence.

“There may be one more thing we could attempt,” he says and the change of subject comes as a pleasant surprise to Levi, “but I hesitate to suggest it.”

Levi wonders what can be so terrible that after lugging around dead Nazis and sneaking around military headquarters Erwin still hesitates to suggest it, but asks, “What is it?” nonetheless.

Erwin places the cup down on the table again. “The train is scheduled to make a stop at a station approximately a hundred kilometres northwest from the city,” he begins thoughtfully, like coming up with the plan as he speaks. “Though tampering with the train itself may prove impossible, there might still be time to damage the rails further on along its designated route.”

Levi frowns again. “A hundred kilometres?” he asks in disbelief.

Erwin nods, deep in thought. “The departure has been scheduled for five o’clock on Saturday morning,” he says, “so the mission would have to take place during the night some hours before.”

“How would you get there and back in the middle of the night?” Levi points out, making Erwin look up suddenly; his eyes stay unfocused for another ten seconds.

“I may know of a place, a cottage outside the city that we used as a temporary headquarters after relocating to Dresden,” he explains, his voice still distant, like he’s thinking out loud. “The rails are an estimated ten kilometres from there, so it could easily operate as a base. The walk to the rails and back would take some three hours, all in all. So it is feasible.”

“You’re not serious,” Levi says. “And again, how do you plan on getting there and back in a day?”

“I could drive,” the man answers quickly; his eyes are bright, like something has lit a spark of madness in them.

“You have a car?” Levi asks now, taking a gulp of Farlan’s tea without thinking, grimacing as the cold liquid fills his mouth.

“I could acquire one by tomorrow,” Erwin insists and something tells Levi he’ll go on with this insane plan of his even if it turns out to be the least practical strategy anyone has ever thought of.

“You can’t honestly be planning on doing something like this by yourself,” Levi tells him, a touch surprised at the stern tone of his own voice. “What if something goes wrong? What if someone sees you? What if you get injured? What if...”

Something in Erwin’s expression makes Levi’s words falter.

“You’re not suggesting...?” he starts again, and the other man’s face grows noticeably sheepish. “No. Absolutely not,” Levi refuses at once.

“I haven’t asked you for anything,” Erwin points out defensively but Levi shakes his head forcibly.

“You’re not seriously suggesting that I come with you, are you?” he asks, irritated. “Drive a hundred kilometres just to walk for three hours in the middle of the night and drive all the way back, and that’s only if we manage to do what we’re supposed to? Not for all the tea in fucking China.”

The man’s face grows pensive. “I suppose trying to accomplish it all in one day might be slightly wearisome,” he muses, his gaze fixed on the lamp above the kitchen table. “Spending the whole weekend there would be much less suspicious, especially since I’ll be making use of the car.”

“The whole weekend?” Levi’s voice grows even more disbelieving. “You don’t honestly think I could come with you for a whole weekend.”

“I understand it would be problematic—”

“No, you don’t understand,” Levi corrects him sternly. “I can’t leave my friends here by themselves for a whole weekend. Besides, one of them already thinks I’m your whore. Imagine how this little weekend get-away would look to him.”

Erwin’s eyebrows climb a good couple of centimetres closer to his hairline while the rest of his face goes entirely blank. “Excuse me?” he asks, his voice as devoid of feeling as his expression.

“Can you blame him?” Levi asks the man, irritated. “I’m away till all hours with you and when I come back I have half the black market and more money than any of us have seen in years with me. It’s not that big a leap.”

The man seems to consider these words and Levi can tell the thought has never occurred to him before this, a realisation he finds oddly reassuring, especially on this day. Erwin looks at him in silence, his whole stance suddenly uneasy.

“I apologise,” he says quietly. “I never considered how it would make you look.”

Levi feels a pang of distress, thinking about Krieger and wondering how differently Erwin would see him if he knew about how their arrangement got started. After all, there's no use in pretending Levi's initial purpose wasn't the kind of exchange that's deserving of the title, even if Krieger never kept his end of the bargain. He thinks about his mother in passing as well and wonders whether it ever made her sad when people looked down on her like that, like what she did to feed her child made her worthless.

"I'm not worried about that," Levi cuts in before the man can continue. "It's him who's upset about it, not me."

"I see," Erwin replies quickly. From the wrinkle between his eyebrows Levi can tell he's still trying to find a solution. "And you're absolutely sure that your absence is unachievable?"

"Whatever you're thinking you might as well spill it," Levi demands, exasperated by the determination in the man's voice. "I can tell you're not letting go of this plan, and you're insane enough to attempt it by yourself."

"I have to object to your definition of insanity in this case," Erwin tells him, his expression serious. "If carrying out the mission was important before, it is doubly crucial now. The priority classification of the train has been changed, which means it will be transporting weapons, not ordinary supplies."

Levi can't help frowning. "For the troops fighting against the ones who landed in France?"

The man nods. "I'm sure I don't have to explain why it's important to stop the transport."

"No, you don't have to explain," Levi mutters quietly, "but you have to admit that trying to pull it off by yourself is fucking stupid. I bet we'd both feel better if you came up with something else, and fast."

When Levi looks up, Erwin's expression is apologetic again. "Your friends," he starts hesitantly, drawing out the words like he's reluctant to say them, "do they... enjoy the outdoors?"

Levi stares at him, blinking slowly. "What the fuck sort of solution is that?" he asks the man heatedly. "I told you, they will have no part in this. Not ever."

"I'm not suggesting involving them in the mission," Erwin corrects him. "I'm simply saying that if you're uncomfortable leaving them behind, they could always join us. A weekend excursion in the country."

"A weekend what?"

"Outing," Erwin clarifies. "It's a lovely old building, not far from the river. And the weather's supposed to be excellent."

Levi stares at him again in a stunned silence that lasts a good five seconds. "The weather's supposed to be excellent?" he repeats incredulously. "Excellent for what? Derailing trains and then playing some croquet in the garden?"

Erwin's expression is unimpressed. "It might not be so terrible," he points out cheerlessly and Levi scoffs.

"Oh, really?" Levi says. "It might not be so terrible to spend a whole weekend with you but with Shitbumführer Holtz? We'd probably spend most of our time waiting for you to finish fucking someone else's wife on all of the furniture."

Erwin gives Levi a look of utter exasperation. "How terribly amusing you are," he states dryly. "If you'd like, we could try and find a way to avoid that."

"I told you, my friends will have no part in this," Levi reminds the man indignantly, "and that includes knowing about who and what you are."

"It may not be necessary for them to know all that," Erwin tells him, his gaze on the lamp again. "Am I right in assuming they're like you?"

"False papers?" Levi asks for clarification and the man nods. "Sure, they're like me."

"And you trust them?"

"Completely," Levi replies without hesitation. "I've known them for years. If either one of them wanted to rat me out they would've done it ages ago. Besides, none of us are what you'd call patriotic – I'm sure I don't have to explain why."

Erwin nods thoughtfully, his features suddenly wearied again.

"I do agree with you," he says quietly. "Though I'm used to the pretence by now, I have come to find it extremely tiresome, as you may have observed last night. Should we come to an understanding about this weekend, I would much prefer to spend it as myself, especially in your presence."

Levi stares at the man for a moment lost for words again, not knowing what to think, considering different alternatives for Erwin saying what he did. Why especially in his presence? Is there something about their relationship that makes the pretending more tiring for Erwin, or is he simply not used to it, never having done so with Levi since the day they first met? He deliberates asking the man but in the end decides against it, afraid the answer would explain that fondness Erwin seems to have for him, revealing it to be deeper than what Levi thinks he would be comfortable with at present.

"Perhaps we could reveal my knowledge of your situation," Erwin muses. "That way your friends wouldn't need to be so wary either, and there would be no need for false names."

"Why would you be helping me if you knew?" Levi asks him. "Considering who you're supposed to be?"

"Security," the man replies at once. "Someone in my position can be expected to be aware of the present state of the war. Helping someone like you could prove useful in the aftermath, to establish goodwill and generosity of spirit, and to make up for crimes committed in the past."

Levi frowns. “So helping one Jew would make up for years of following orders to butcher people?”

“Some people seem to think so,” Erwin confirms, “though it might be a case of wishful thinking. Only time will tell.”

Levi grunts and falls silent. He knows already that Isabel and Farlan would believe that lie should he tell it to them – it could even help explain the masses of food he’s been bringing home – and it’s not as if lying to them makes him feel especially guilty considering it’s for their own good. Making his connection with an SS-officer visible to the neighbours might also carry some advantages, making those harbouring suspicions question themselves. After all, if an officer of the SS doesn’t think it strange that Levi and Farlan haven’t been sent to the front, why should they?

“What if something goes wrong with the mission?” Levi asks now. “What if we both die and my friends are stuck in some strange house in the middle of nowhere?”

Erwin stays quiet for a long while before replying. “I can contact Mike and give instructions to retrieve your friends within a few days should he not hear from me,” he says. “He could take them to the base where they’d be kept safe – until the end of the war if need be.”

In his mind Levi tries to weigh the facts objectively, struggling to distance himself from the bursts of excitement the idea of the mission raises in him. The attempted sabotage of the engine was one thing, but the plan Erwin has thought up is something else entirely, and as his initial wariness starts to dwindle, Levi is filled with anticipation about the momentary change of scenery. Despite himself he starts to wonder whether it could be possible to help Erwin again, just to assure he won’t try to accomplish the mission on his own if for no other reason. Levi thinks of the risks of such an attempt and what would happen should the endeavour end poorly: knocking on the man’s door on Tuesday next only to receive no answer and fearing for the worst, going back a few days later to no avail, finally accepting the inevitable and going back to how things were before, or worse.

“I hate the idea of talking you into this,” Erwin tells him, sounding suddenly wary. “I’d prefer it if everything you should undertake would be of your own volition. However, I cannot deny how important this is for me, especially given how limited my opportunities for direct measures are on average. Bringing the war to a close as quickly as possible—”

“I know,” Levi tells him. “It’s not as if I don’t want that as well.”

“I was about to say,” Erwin begins to clarify, “that though that is my main concern, I have to admit to having reasons that are more personal to explain my involvement. I’d assume that is a sentiment to which you can relate.”

Levi doesn’t need to consider these words. When he thinks about it, it seems almost shameful how personal his reasons are, how much weight he puts on his own situation, and those of Farlan and Isabel. The greater good is not something he’s used to taking into account, having never had much interest in visions and grand ideas in the past. As he looks at Erwin, however, he suddenly catches a glimpse of what that must be like, to have so much to live and die for, such a multitude of incentives.

“So what’s the cottage like?”

Erwin smiles in a way that seems to Levi almost relieved. “Just a charming little house,” he describes kindly. “I’ve stayed there several times before. It’s rather old, but in decent repair, with a small orchard on the west side of the garden.”

“And it’s close to the river?” Levi asks now, and the man nods.

“Not far,” he confirms. “There’s a village close by where we could rent bicycles.”

Levi scoffs quietly. It seems absurd now, but there was a time when people’s lives were like that, and he supposes for many people things haven’t changed so much since those days, though it seems strange to him that there can still be anyone who enjoys trips to the country or to the seaside. Farlan has spoken of those holidays too, lying on beaches, scorched by the sun – his parents used to own a house on Rügen – enjoying cold drinks between dips in the sea. Levi’s youth never included any of that, of course, save for that one trip to the sea with his mother, but he was too young to remember much about it now. As for Isabel, from her yearning for nature it’s clear that she’s not used to living in a city, and Levi knows she would jump at the opportunity to get away, if even for a weekend. As for Farlan, though he might not mind the idea of the trip, Levi is sure his mistrust of Erwin combined with his fear of the world outside their apartment is more than enough to turn him against the plan.

“Do you suppose they would be willing to come along?” Erwin asks, like guessing Levi’s thoughts.

“It depends on whether I can get them to trust you,” he says truthfully, “and even then I can’t guarantee anything.”

“And what about you?”

Levi shrugs. “If they won’t go, neither will I. It’s as simple as that,” he states plainly.

“I understand,” Erwin assures him and it seems to Levi as though he’s about to continue when the sound of a door opening and closing carries into the small kitchen.

Isabel and Farlan enter the room carefully, like fearing they’ll find nothing but Levi’s mangled remains spread across the floor; when Levi turns to look at them he’s surprised at the seriousness of the girl’s expression as she lingers by the door, looking at Erwin inquiringly.

“Hello,” she finally says in what Levi recognises as her most polite tone.

“Hello,” Erwin says back, getting up from his seat and walking around the table to shake her hand. “I’m Erwin,” the man introduces himself familiarly, nodding at Farlan who passes to the stove and starts boiling more water for tea.

“Is big brother in trouble?” Isabel asks, taking the man’s hand absently, her eyes shifting between the two of them uncertainly.

Levi shakes his head. "He's my boss," he explains and the girl seems to relax a little, giving Erwin's hand a strong shake before walking over to the table and taking a seat.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you all like this," the man says, returning to his previous spot after her. "I'm aware that the uniform makes people remember all the bad things they've done, as few as they may be. Most people are startled by it."

An awkward silence fills the kitchen and Levi looks around himself at their odd congregation, Erwin sticking out like a sore thumb in his clothes, making the whole situation resemble an interrogation. Levi glances at Farlan as he crosses the kitchen and sits down on the edge of his seat, his posture rigid. Suddenly Levi realises it's up to him to say something, to diffuse the tension building up in the room.

"He just came to ask me something," Levi tells his friends, and even Farlan looks up from the tabletop.

"Yes," Erwin confirms. "I was hoping you could all join me on an excursion."

Farlan frowns. "An excursion?" he repeats, and the Commander nods.

"Yes," he says again. "I'm going out of town for the weekend and I would like to invite you all to come with me."

Isabel and Farlan share a look before turning to Levi, who's struggling to find a way to explain it all.

"It's alright," he tries awkwardly. "He's been helping me, and he knows about what I am, so there's really no reason for you to..."

His words trail off when he looks at Farlan, whose expression has changed from worried to a state of anger the like of which Levi has never seen before. His hands have stopped clasping each other and have grabbed a firm hold of the edge of the table instead, staying rigidly in their place when he pushes himself to his feet again. He stares down at Levi in silence for a few seconds.

"Can I speak to you privately for a moment?" The words push out through gritted teeth, and the man doesn't wait for Levi's reply before walking into the bedroom.

Levi gives Isabel a calming look before following Farlan, who has retreated to the corner of the room furthest from the kitchen and turned his back toward it. Levi closes the door behind himself before crossing over to the other man, who doesn't turn around until he hears Levi's footsteps right behind him.

"How could you do such a thing?" he asks in a poisonous hiss that makes Levi shudder. "How could you tell someone like him? He could have us all killed!"

"I didn't have a choice," Levi tells him, trying to sound calm but failing. "Remember that day when I got checked by the Gestapo? He's the one who helped me hide. What was I supposed to tell him, that I was playing hide and seek with a bunch of armed thugs?"

Farlan looks at him defiantly, his face blotchy with an angry blush. “That doesn’t matter!” he insists in a whisper. “You told him about Isabel and me! Do you have any idea what it was like, to hear a knock on the door and to open it to have someone like him asking after you? Do you have any idea how scared I was?”

Levi stops to take a deep breath. “I’m sure it was terrible,” he admits sullenly, “but he said he could warn us if he ever found out someone else was looking for us and I thought—”

“He came here to ask you to go out of town with him! Not to warn you about anything!” Farlan argues heatedly. “Honestly, I cannot believe you of all people would believe something so fucking stupid.”

Levi feels his anger flaring. “He wants to help,” he nearly growls now. “How many times do I have to say that? He could’ve reported me months ago but he hasn’t. He could refuse to pay me, but he hasn’t. He’s been nothing but good to me—”

“You cannot trust someone like that!” Farlan counters, clearly fighting to keep his voice down. “Why would he want to help someone like you? What’s in it for him?”

“He says we’re losing the war,” Levi says quietly.

Farlan’s eyes widen for an instant before he crosses his arms across his chest and huffs in annoyance. “That’s bullshit.”

“He says the enemy troops’ landings in Normandy a couple of months ago went off without a hitch,” Levi goes on, “and that the news haven’t reported anything truthful since before Stalingrad. Apparently our boys didn’t do so well in there either. Haven’t you ever wondered why they stopped writing about that?”

Farlan stares at him in silence for a long while. “So you believe him?” he finally asks, his voice calmer now even if his expression is still as stony as ever.

Levi shrugs. “He says he wants to have someone who can testify for him when the time comes, say that he tried to help,” he explains. “In the end it doesn’t really matter whether I believe it or not. The most important thing is that he does.”

“What if he’s wrong?” the other man insists. “What if the troops start doing better again and he decides he doesn’t need to help someone like you?”

“I guess I’ll cross that bridge if I come to it. Truth be told it matters a lot more to me that he’s helping us now,” Levi replies dismissively. “For a Nazi he’s not so terrible, you know.”

Farlan scoffs, looking incredulous. “Can you even hear yourself?” he asks. “He’s probably killed hundreds of people in cold blood and you—”

“He works in the SS-Personalhauptamt,” Levi says. “All they do is make records. As far as I know that’s all he’s ever done.”

“You’re defending one of them now?” Farlan’s voice carries a hint of contempt that Levi tries hard to ignore.

“I’m not defending anyone,” he replies, and he can’t remember the last time he felt so frustrated. He wishes more than anything that he could simply tell Farlan the truth about Erwin, how the man is the only person who has ever treated Levi like an equal, how he’s never treated Levi with anything but respect, how he’s improved Levi’s life in so many ways.

“If he’s as innocent as he says he is, why would he need to help someone like you?” Farlan demands. “If all he’s ever done is make records, why is he so sure people will think he’s done something wrong?”

“He’s still an SS-officer,” Levi huffs. “If what he says is true, if we’re really losing the war, something like that’s not going to look good on anyone.”

“How can you trust someone like him?” Farlan asks him now. “They’re all the same. Killers and scum.”

“What about Christofer?”

Farlan’s eyes fill with the kind of hurt that makes Levi regret his words instantly. “Don’t you dare bring him into this,” the man whispers, his voice breaking. “He has no choice!”

“What makes you think he does?” Levi asks angrily, still dully noting the optimistic present tense as he points towards the door to the kitchen. “Just fucking look at us! You think I like saying Heil Hitler and watching the parades and listening to the news on the radio like I want to hear how invincible the fucking army is? Do you think I’d be doing any of that if I had a choice?”

Farlan looks at him mutely, eyes misty, wiping his nose on the side of his hand.

“We all do what we have to,” Levi tells him, “and if we’re halfway decent we try to help others as best we can. You’ve been stuck in here for so long that you’ve forgotten there are still people like that. I have to believe that he’s one of them.”

“How can you?” Farlan demands, his voice pleading.

“I don’t know why,” Levi admits calmly, “but I trust him. I don’t think there’s any way I could explain it so you’d understand.”

Farlan stares at the door for a moment in silence before shaking his head. “No, I don’t think there is either,” he agrees. “I just don’t know what to think about this. Why didn’t you tell us before? Or if not Isabel, why didn’t you tell me?”

Levi sighs, turning his eyes on the floor. “I didn’t want you to worry,” he explains briefly. “I cause you both enough concern as it is.”

“And all he wants is to feed you well and take you on trips and should we lose the war you just need to tell everyone he did all of that?”

Levi shrugs again. “I suppose.”

“I know we already talked about this,” the man says now, blushing suddenly, “and I said I’d believe you. But I find it hard to believe that you’re not—”

“He’s not forcing me to sleep with him, for any of this,” Levi snaps impatiently. “Do you think he’d be dragging the two of you along on this trip if he were?”

Farlan considers his words sullenly. “I don’t know,” he says again. “I don’t know what to think. I don’t know what this trip is supposed to be about.”

“The weather’s going to be great,” Levi tells him, feeling stupid for repeating Erwin’s words. “He’s got a cottage outside the city. We can rent bicycles and swim in the river. The garden has an orchard on the west side, we can sit outside and watch the sunset or whatever the fuck people do on holidays. You should know better than I do.”

Farlan scoffs. “It’s been so long since I was that person that I can barely remember it now,” he whispers, shaking his head. “God. Can life really have been like that?”

“For some people it still is,” Levi says. “You know Isabel would love it.”

Farlan glances at the door again. “I know,” he sighs. “I just don’t know what to do. I want to believe you when you say you trust him but just seeing that uniform scares the shit out of me and I just—”

“I know,” Levi agrees quietly. “It makes me sick, seeing him like that too. But at the end of the day he’s a lot more like us that you’d think. He’s pretending to be something he’s not, just like the three of us. It’s not just my life that’s on the line here, you know. He’s taking an enormous risk in helping me.”

Farlan falls quiet, considering his words. “I just do not like seeing you like this,” he finally states. “You’re supposed to be the careful one and this seems too reckless.”

“I told you, I had no choice. I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing here. I’m just trying to make the best of a bad situation,” Levi explains and when Farlan doesn’t speak he continues, “Look, if he wanted to kill us he’d really not need to take us anywhere. He could line us up against the building and shoot us right there.”

“Then why does he want us to go?” Farlan insists. “Why not just you, since you’re the one he’s trying to help?”

“You think I’m going to leave you two here by yourselves? I told him I’d go if you go so he extended the invitation. And besides,” Levi says, hesitating for a moment before finishing, “I think he’s lonely.”

Farlan rolls his eyes. “I’m sure he has a lot of Nazi friends. Why doesn’t he just go with them?”

“He says they’re all fucking animals. He doesn’t like spending time with them,” Levi embellishes and shrugs. “I mean, would you?”

Farlan sighs and shakes his head. “So do you want to go then?”

“Might not be the worst thing,” Levi replies and shrugs again. “Fresh air and all that. And I wouldn’t mind the neighbours knowing my boss is an SS-officer either.”

Farlan seems to agree with this at least, nodding his head hesitantly as they both fall silent, hearing nothing but Erwin and Isabel’s voices carrying in quietly from the kitchen.

“I know we’ve never talked about it,” Farlan finally says, “but it’s not as if we don’t all know that you’re the head of this household. Ever since you sat next to me on that train I’ve felt like I owe you my life, and we both know I could never have looked after Isabel on my own. Please, don’t argue with me on this,” he hurries to put in as he sees Levi opening his mouth. “Up until now I’ve never questioned any of your decisions. There is no one in the world I trust more than you.”

Levi feels his brows furrowing further as he looks at Farlan who’s staring at his feet, his hair falling over his eyes, and he can’t help but feel that pang of anxiety, that urge to keep his family safe and the overwhelming knowledge of how difficult it will be. He thinks about their lives in this apartment, how fragile this peace is, how quickly their quiet moments around the kitchen table could turn into something else, or to nothing at all, and for a fleeting second he wishes he could share that responsibility he feels for everything remaining as it is.

“You’re absolutely sure you trust him?” Farlan asks now, and Levi nods.

“He just wants to do something nice for all of us,” he lies calmly, “but if you two don’t want to go, neither will I.”

Farlan looks at Levi without speaking, his expression full of apprehension and concern as he seems to be considering his options.

“We should get back,” he finally states, walking past him out of the room.

When they enter the kitchen they find Isabel teaching Erwin how to play kladderjass at the table; she turns to them excitedly before dealing herself and the man an additional three cards each.

“Are we going on a trip?” she asks Levi, who looks over at Farlan as he sits down on Isabel’s left.

“Would you like to?” Levi asks her, taking a seat by Erwin, who seems to be listening intently while keeping his eyes mainly on his cards.

Isabel nods vigorously. “Erwin said we can rent bicycles and go swimming,” she tells them enthusiastically and Levi can’t help glancing at the man by his right, wondering whether it had been a tactical move from his part to say those things to the girl.

“It’s just an idea,” Erwin says evasively, looking across the table at Farlan. “I understand you have concerns, and nothing I say is going to change that. I simply thought you would all enjoy a little break from your everyday routines. I suppose I feel a bit guilty for how hard your friend works at keeping my home clean.”

“I’m sure he does. And you’re right, I do have concerns,” Farlan replies, looking at Levi as he stops to consider his next words. “If I’m being honest, just the thought of going on a holiday seems bizarre – especially accompanied by someone like you, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

“I don’t mind in the slightest,” Erwin assures the other man, raising his hand dismissively. “In fact, I’d find it alarming if you weren’t unnerved by my presence, considering your situation.”

Farlan nods. “So you’re familiar with it?”

“Only with what Levi has told me,” Erwin says, and Levi feels a shiver shooting down his spine at the mention of his name. “That is, that you’re all using false papers. The why of it is none of my business, and neither are your real names, should you prefer not to tell me.”

Farlan and Isabel share a look before turning to Levi, who shrugs.

“Whether you tell him or not is up to you,” he says. “Just because I did doesn’t mean you have to.”

The words are barely out of his mouth when Isabel has reached across the table and started shaking Erwin’s hand again. “I’m Isabel,” she tells him, grinning widely.

“Hello, Isabel,” Erwin replies, smiling. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Isabel’s eagerness doesn’t surprise Levi; he’s noticed before how the girl seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to people, an ability similar to Levi’s own skill for reading people, though Isabel’s seems even more like an animal instinct, like something internal rather than learned. Though he’s far past requiring additional confirmations about Erwin’s character, Levi can’t help feeling relieved. They all turn to look at Farlan, who is frowning, his gaze bouncing restlessly between them as he weighs his words.

“I have my doubts about you,” he tells Erwin without apology, “but I trust Levi. If he says you’re trying to help then I won’t argue with that.”

“I understand,” Erwin says, nodding slowly.

“So are we going on the trip then?” Isabel asks, her voice pleading, nearly leaping off her chair when Farlan nods.

“Sure,” he says, and Levi can tell he’s trying to keep his voice steady. “I don’t want to keep you two from going, and I don’t want to stay behind by myself.”

Erwin stays to agree on the details – mainly that he’ll pick them up the following day at half past three – before taking his leave, exchanging a few hushed words with Levi at the door about finalising the details regarding the mission later. Levi nods hurriedly before the man exits the apartment, remembering his own plans for the rest of the day only in his absence.

He heads out after dinner, having done his best to make Farlan feel better about Erwin's sudden appearance, to little avail it seems.

While he's making his way through the city Levi thinks of the night ahead with a sort of distance he's been able to maintain ever since that night he spent at Erwin's apartment. Though he can't say that the situation has improved much, or that visiting Krieger is any more pleasant to him now than it was before, there's a sort of calmness he seems to have found through his business with Erwin that makes the nights easier to bear afterwards, and easier to forget. As he walks, Levi remembers suddenly why he's just left his own apartment and not Erwin's, and he wonders absently if this is another thing the two of them share and whether Lilian is nothing to Erwin but a way to maintain his cover, an unpleasant duty in the midst of countless others. Absently Levi hopes there's more to the story than that; arrangements baring resemblance to his and Krieger's are something he wouldn't wish on anyone, and least of all Erwin. It occurs to Levi only then that Erwin and Lilian could be genuine lovers, torn tragically apart by war and the times in which they're living, not to mention Lilian's marriage, though the night when Levi found out about Erwin would suggest otherwise.

He runs up the stone steps to Krieger's door soundlessly, his reluctance taken over by his fear of being seen by one of the man's neighbours. He slips into the apartment as soon as he's able and for a moment he's not sure which surprises him more, the fact that Krieger is sober or the dim glowing light carrying into the hallway from the sitting room. When he looks at Krieger the man seems nervous, wiping his brow with a plain white handkerchief.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Levi asks, not realising his words have come out in a whisper until the other man speaks out loud.

"Nothing," he says calmly, his lips curling into a hasty smile. "There's nothing at all wrong with me. Does it seem like there is? Hmm?"

Levi gives Krieger a long look before shaking his head slowly. "I suppose no more than usual," he finally mutters, keeping an eye on the man and realising only now he forgot to give Erwin the razor as he feels the calming weight of it in his pocket.

As he walks out into the sitting room warily, Krieger follows him at a half run, speeding past him at the entrance and hurrying over to a waist-high chest of drawers, picking up a box of matches and getting to lighting the last few candles in silver holders that are still without flames on top of it and as Levi looks around the room he can see every tabletop has been filled similarly with candles burning brightly, filling the space with that soft, earthy glow. Levi notices the small round table in the middle of the room, set with white lace and patterned china, a silver candelabra and polished utensils that shine in the dim light and he shudders.

"What the fuck is all this?" he asks, again in a whisper as Krieger crosses over to the table to pull out one of the two chairs.

"Please," he says; the word sounds strange from his mouth. "Have a seat."

Levi doesn't move. "What for?" he asks now, feeling the urge to glance behind himself but resisting.

"I thought we could have dinner," Krieger tells him, and Levi can hear the impatience that's creeping into his voice. "You still eat, don't you? Hmm?"

"I'd rather just do what we always do," Levi replies, feeling for the razor in his pocket again. "Why should we pretend I'm here for anything else?"

"I don't think you're just here for that," Krieger says; his hands are now clutching the backrest of the chair with a grip so tight it's turning his fingers white. "I'm sorry if you got the impression that I just wanted to fuck you."

"Don't apologise to me," Levi says instantly. "I don't understand what the fuck you're trying to do but I don't want any part in it. I thought I'd made it pretty fucking clear that I—"

Levi's words cut off when Krieger lifts the chair up and bangs it forcefully against the floor, closing his eyes as an expression of immense concentration fills his features.

"Will you just," he starts, pushing the words out through gritted teeth, quiet and oddly calm, "will you just sit down? Hmm? That's all you have to do. Just sit down."

"Why?" Levi asks, and Krieger draws a deep breath that makes Levi shudder again.

"I would like for you," he starts again, even more slowly than before, "to sit down and have dinner with me. Alright? Is that too much to ask? You'd think it'd be easier for you to have food in your mouth rather than my cock but apparently I was wrong about that too."

For a moment Levi wonders whether he should ask Krieger what else he has been wrong about but in the end stays quiet, glancing behind himself before crossing the room and drawing himself a chair before sitting down on the edge of it, hand stroking the smooth handle of Erwin's razor.

Across the table Krieger has gritted his teeth again, his eyes directed toward the ceiling as he sits, breathing deeply, and lifts the lids off two serving dishes; the first is filled to the brim with a lamb stew and the other with season's vegetables, steamed and lathered with butter. He fills their glasses with red wine from a decanter without asking Levi whether he'd like some, turning the serving forks and spoons toward him to offer him the first serve. He chooses a thick slice of bread for himself, buttering it thinly before taking a large bite.

"Please," he says, and the word makes Levi cringe again, "have some stew."

"I'm not hungry," Levi tells him indifferently, keeping his senses alert to hear if anyone else enters the apartment. He wonders whether he should ask the man what this is all about, but something tells him he'll be better off not knowing.

"I had my housekeeper make all of it especially for tonight," Krieger tells him without him asking. "She probably thinks I'm fucking some secretary. Anyway, it doesn't matter. What matters is that we're here now. Isn't that right? Hmm?"

Levi feels his armpits starting to itch with sweat as he watches Krieger fill his own plate with vegetables and meat before taking a large gulp of the wine. Just as he's about to lift his lamb-laden fork to his mouth he suddenly stops and pulls the handkerchief out of his pocket again; Levi follows him with his eyes as he wipes at the beads of perspiration on his forehead and neck, noting absently how despite the candles and the warm summer night, the room isn't uncomfortably hot.

"Go on. Eat something," Krieger tells him again, pushing the serving dishes closer to him. "The lamb is really good. You should try some."

"I told you, I'm not—"

"Right, you're not fucking hungry, are you?" Krieger mutters almost more to himself. "You're not hungry, you don't want my food, you don't want anything from me, do you, you don't want this, you don't want me, do you? You fucking filthy RAT, HOW FUCKING DARE YOU DISRESPECT—"

Krieger's shouted insults die out as soon as they've begun when he smashes the bread knife against the table – the tip of the blade sinks into the wood by the man's plate – and falls silent, pursing his lips together as if to stop himself from saying anything further. Levi frowns as he looks over at the man who is drawing in deep breaths through his nose, making his moustache quiver.

"All I wanted was a nice dinner," Krieger says, his voice calm again. "I just wanted to have a nice dinner with you. Just some good food. I thought we could talk."

"What would we talk about?" Levi asks him, frowning.

Krieger looks up at his words, his expression suddenly almost excited as he's clearly not caught Levi's meaning. "We can talk about anything you want," he replies. "Berlin. The good old days."

"There was nothing good about those days," Levi tells the man, his voice strangely indifferent. "Why the fuck do you think I left? It was fucking unbearable."

Krieger has put down his knife and fork, but picks them back up again, stuffing his mouth with potato before saying, "I never really thought about that. What it was like for you."

Levi scoffs. "You don't have to tell me that," he remarks dryly, leaning back in his chair.

"I guess things got worse when they took your uncle away," the man assumes, making Levi grit his teeth. "Before I left Berlin the kids in my neighbourhood used to throw rocks at Jews. You're lucky you never had to wear the star. That thing was like having a target drawn on your back."

"Yes," Levi mutters bitterly. "I'm the lucky one. I know."

"You know I always liked your uncle," Krieger goes on with his rambling. "Until he lost his sense of humour, that is. But at that point I wasn't exactly a regular in your shop anyway, so I

suppose it doesn't really matter."

Levi would like to let the man know that the only thing Kenny and he ever agreed upon was that Krieger was the worst kind of Nazi swine who should be disposed of at the earliest convenience, and that the only reason Kenny made those jokes was so the man would buy the usual extra cigarettes. Though they never talked about it, it was clear Kenny wasn't fooled for a minute into thinking Krieger's incessant asking after Levi was about him simply making conversation, no matter how subtly the man tried to present his questions.

As he looks across the table now, Levi wonders whether his uncle thought they had an arrangement even then, and whether that had something to do with his terrible moods on Sunday mornings when Levi would finally come back home after a weekend away. Well, seeing how things are now it doesn't seem to matter one way or the other, Levi thinks and lets it go.

"See? This is nice," Krieger says, looking up from his plate. "I like thinking about our past. I like to remember how you looked back then, sweeping the floors in that little shop of yours, stocking the shelves. You can't have been older than fifteen when I first came in there."

"I was seventeen," Levi corrects the man, though he's not sure why.

Krieger looks at him slyly. "So you do remember it. The first time we met."

For a moment Levi considers telling the man it was the most unfortunate day of his life so far, when he walked into the shop. Kenny was taking his usual afternoon nap and had left Levi in charge, but even in those days the business was slow and the customers were few and far between, and in this state of boredom Levi had begun to remove all the sparse items from the shelves to properly clean them. He worked one shelf at a time, dusting and wiping the lowest ones in particular, when Krieger turned up suddenly to hover over him. Levi still remembers the man's intent stare as he looked down at his kneeling figure, and something about his posture made Levi scramble to his feet as fast as he could. He asked for something, though Levi doesn't remember what, made some remarks that in those days struck Levi as odd before taking his leave without buying anything.

Since that day not a week went by without Krieger showing up to get a tin of beans or a pack of cigarettes, until the bans on Jewish businesses got too extensive for him to want to risk being seen there, or so Levi has always assumed. Once he even offered Levi a hefty sum of money to come and clean his new apartment before his moving in and though Levi agreed for the pay – which he was in desperate need of at the time – that one afternoon scrubbing Krieger's floors proved to Levi that his instincts about the man had been right and they barely saw each other after that, to Levi's ultimate relief. There's still something of that day in the way Krieger stares at him, though it seems much of that hunger has since been satisfied.

"You've always looked younger than you are," Krieger tells him in between mouthfuls of lamb. "I guess your mother was too busy whoring her way through Berlin to feed you properly. Hmm?"

"I guess," Levi agrees quietly.

“I had my first time with a whore,” the man goes on. “Who knows? Maybe it was you mother. Though you shouldn’t worry, I was too old then to have gotten her pregnant with you. So that’s a relief at least.”

Levi stares at the man in utter disgust, fighting the surge of nausea back down his throat as his hand squeezes so tightly around the razor he can feel the dull side of the blade digging into his flesh.

“I don’t remember seeing any starving brats in the corner, though,” Krieger muses, taking a sip of his wine. “Well, I can’t remember much anything about it to be honest, save for the way she squealed like a pig when I fucked her up the arse. Much like you did, that first time.”

Levi feels that calming rage taking over him as he looks at Krieger, those squint-y little eyes and the drops of gravy stuck on his dark moustache, and the drops of sweat that are again gathering on his brow. Levi’s eyes follow the man’s hand as he wipes at them with his handkerchief, moving the cloth to his neck, and Erwin’s razor feels suddenly lighter in Levi’s grip. He remembers in a flash the first day they met and the man’s words to him at the dinner table over lamb and root vegetables, just like now: force them into a position where they can’t take advantage of their upper body strength, try and get behind them, keep you knife arm lowered until the last moment.

“But you don’t like thinking about that, do you? Hmm?” Krieger asks him, his expression growing gloomy again as he cuts up a piece of lamb jerkily. “You don’t like to think about me even when I make you feel good. Do you?”

Levi doesn’t answer. The forcefulness of Krieger’s movements is making the bread knife shake and Levi knows it’s a possible hindrance, easy for Krieger to grab should he attempt anything. He tests the release of the blade in his pocket; it’s not as smooth as he’d like.

“I was supposed to have a lot more fucking time than this,” Krieger mutters, more to himself it seems, cutting up his food but not eating it. “It’s never as good as you think it’s going to be, is it? Hmm? And that’s because you’re such a cold fucking bitch. LOOK AT ME WHEN I’M TALKING TO YOU!”

Levi’s eyes pull away from the knife and meet Krieger’s, full of anger and a kind of panic Levi’s not used to seeing in them before. He can feel his own breathing growing shallow as his mind works feverishly to decipher the meaning behind the man’s words: why is he running out of time? He can barely make out the blotchy blush on Krieger’s face in the warm light of the candles and for the first time he grows hopeful.

“I don’t know why I thought you’d care,” Krieger snaps at him. “All you ever wanted from me were those fucking travel papers, isn’t that right? Hmm? And a lot of fucking good that did you, didn’t it? How does it feel, having whored yourself for nothing? Hmm?”

Levi grits his teeth not to reply.

“It’s too fucking late now,” Krieger says. “Too fucking late. That fucking Osterhaus, I swear to fucking God the next time I see him I’m going to rip his arse in two, I’m going to make him squeal like a fucking pig.”

Levi can't help his eyes widening with surprise at the familiar name, but it doesn't seem like Krieger has noticed; the man is still cutting his lamb into minuscule pieces, the utensils scratching the bottom of his plate.

"You don't fucking care, do you? Hmm?" Krieger asks him, glancing up from his plate. "You don't care if they send me away. East, west, it doesn't matter to you, does it? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHAT IT MEANS?!"

Krieger slams his plate against the table; the porcelain cracks in two and starts leaking a puddle of gravy onto the white lace of the tablecloth. He's still holding on to the rims of the shattered pieces, his hands shaking violently as he draws deep breaths, his eyes fixed on Levi who has frozen in place as the realisation of what all of it is for starts to dawn on him. They stare at each other across the table, fighting for air, both waiting for the other one to make the first move. At the first sound of Krieger's chair against the floor, Levi jumps from his seat; he's almost at the door when the man catches him, his hand closing around Levi's throat.

"I'll fucking make you care, you ungrateful little shit!" he spits, grabbing the back of Levi's shirt to drag him into the bedroom.

He pushes Levi face down on the bed, pulling his trousers painfully over his hips before climbing behind him, his fingers tugging at Levi's hair as he holds him still. Levi can hear the metallic clinks of the buckle of his belt as he loosens it, can feel him pressing closer, the hand brushing against his buttocks filling him with dread for what will come next. Krieger is breathing heavily and swearing to himself, hasty words and broken-off sentences about punishment which, as far as Levi can tell, doesn't seem to be forthcoming. After several minutes Krieger's hold on his hair grows tighter and he pulls him up onto his knees before shoving him forcefully off the bed.

"Get out," the man growls at him as he struggles onto his feet; Levi is disgusted to see tears on his face. "Didn't you fucking hear me?! Get the fuck out! GET OUT!"

Levi pulls up his trousers and runs, through the apartment and down the stairs, to the river and across the Augustus Bridge. When he gets to a small alleyway between two factory buildings he finally slows down and stops, leaning against one of the buildings and sitting down, his breathing heavy and quick, his brow sweaty and his legs weak. He stares at the red brick wall in front of him and rubs at the dull ache on the back of his head absently as a smile starts to tug at the corners of his mouth and a few drops of rain start to fall.

Levi raises his face up toward the sky and laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- attempted rape

- violence

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

It's 2:30 AM and I am practically falling asleep over my laptop but I just couldn't wait until tomorrow to post this. Chapter 7 is one of my favourites so far and I really hope you all enjoy it as well. I'm going to start posting some research material on my tumblr if anyone's interested. So in case you were wondering what the song Lili Marlene is like or where all my knowledge of train sabotage comes from, check it out! Next deadline: December 4th.

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi wakes up early on Friday morning, living the usual dreariness of his life for a few odd seconds before he remembers. He stares up at the ceiling in the amber glow of the dawn pushing into the room through a gap in the curtains and smiles, for the first time in years he smiles for no other reason than for being like he is, free at least from something. He gets out of bed swiftly, pulling on his trousers and feeling Erwin's razor still in the pocket, grounding despite its history of violence. Walking out he finds Farlan in the sitting room busily writing something that looks like a letter; he covers the page as soon as he notices Levi, looking at him with anxiety etched across his features.

"I couldn't sleep," he tells Levi unnecessarily, folding up the piece of paper and slipping it between the pages of a familiar looking notebook as Levi takes a seat in the tattered armchair by the desk.

"Everything's going to be just fine," Levi says, equally needlessly, and Farlan hurries to nod.

"Yes, I know," he agrees in a mutter. "It's just... Well, ever since we came to Dresden I've not been further than a few kilometres from this apartment."

"I know," Levi says quietly. "It's strange to think about the world outside it, even for me."

They fall silent, Farlan staring at his notebook and suddenly letting out a laugh. "To think I wanted to travel before all this," he whispers. "More than anything, I just wanted to get away. Italy, Argentina, Egypt, Greece..." His words trail off and he laughs again bitterly.

"There's still time for all of that," Levi says; he hasn't felt so hopeful and full of life since his mission with Erwin. "If what Erwin says is true, if the war really is ending, we might all be

free to do what we want again in no time. Remember what we said, about you going back to university and Isabel working on a farm. All of that could still happen.”

Farlan sighs and shrugs. “And what about you?” he asks hesitantly. “If the war ends, what will you do?”

Levi considers the question again for a moment, tries to imagine his life past the span of the war, but it’s still difficult to picture things changing very much; after all, it’s not the war that made people despise the Jews, that hatred was there long before the German army crossed any borders. The thought of staying in Germany isn’t a comforting one, but leaving doesn’t seem like a much better option, though a sudden idea of England crosses his mind uninvited. For a second Levi even pictures himself returning to Berlin and reclaiming the little shop Kenny used to own, but something about it doesn’t seem quite right. He wonders whether all of this daydreaming is easier for Farlan and Isabel because they’re used to having more opportunities; even as a child living with Kenny, Levi could never see himself getting much further in life.

“I don’t know,” he is forced to admit. “Ask me again when the war ends.”

“Sure,” Farlan agrees after flashing Levi a hint of a smile and turning back to his notebook. “Who knows? Maybe you’ll be able to continue working for the Sturmbannführer.”

“Why would you think that?” Levi asks, frowning at the statement as Farlan shrugs again.

“I just thought you might like to,” he explains himself briefly but Levi can detect a new kind of tone in Farlan’s voice, “since you’ve enjoyed it so much so far.”

Levi tries not to entertain the idea, not only because of its outlandishness but also because he suddenly remembers one of the Nazi officers asking about the English having male servants, to which Erwin’s answer was ‘and what they do with them is anyone’s guess’.

“You’re right,” he tells Farlan nonetheless; the man glances up, surprised. “I have enjoyed it so far.”

The other man gives him a long look before going back to his writing, and Levi wonders whether he was expecting him to deny it, the pleasure he finds in working with Erwin. It’s obvious to him Farlan is reading more into their connection than is necessary, but the misguided assumptions don’t bother him nearly as much as he thought they would; after all, what Farlan wishes to believe is his business. As he stands up, Levi can just make out the words *Dear Christofer* at the top of the page on which the man is writing, realising it’s been years since Farlan has sent any letters.

The rest of the morning seems to slip by without Levi fully noticing the passing of time; Isabel wakes up around nine and starts going through the things she’s decided to take with her, a change of clothes and her collection of newspaper clippings about U-Boats, which Levi packs into the worn duffel bag he last filled with his meagre belongings the night he left Berlin. He chooses a few items of clothing for himself and fits them in with Isabel’s, who is laughing loudly at Farlan’s small leather suitcase which, compared to Levi’s tattered sack of cloth, looks very fancy and formal.

“My parents bought it for me for my eighteenth birthday,” he tells Isabel. “I doubt they imagined I’d be using it for this.”

“For going on holiday?” she asks him next and he looks up, confused.

“I’m sorry,” he says, turning back to the suitcase. “I was thinking about something else.”

He retreats to the bedroom after lunch as Levi starts on the dishes and Isabel goes downstairs to say goodbye to Frau Gernhardt and Bruno and Hanna, and when Levi walks in some thirty minutes later, he finds the man in front of a mirror with a comb and a bowl of water, trying to force the longer strands of hair falling over his eyes into a quiff without much success. When he sees Levi’s bewildered expression in the mirror he drops the comb and sighs.

“What?” he snaps and Levi shrugs almost defensively.

“I didn’t say anything,” he remarks, keeping his tone neutral. “It just reminded me, my hair’s getting a bit long. If I pack the clippers would you mind cutting it when we get there?”

Farlan stares at his reflection for a moment before sighing heavily. “I might as well do it now,” he decides. “I’ll be too nervous later. I’d probably cut off your ear.”

He takes the metal hair clippers from the drawer of the washstand as Levi fetches a chair and a pair of scissors, sitting down in the bedroom where the light is better. Farlan combs through his hair gently before parting it in the middle and grabbing the scissors, cutting and evening out the tips effortlessly before starting on the undercut.

“Did you ever think of doing this for a living?” Levi asks the man, who snorts.

“I’d like to think my aspirations were always a bit higher than this,” he says almost sourly. “I didn’t go to university to become a barber, you know.”

“Seems as good as anything to me,” Levi mutters as the other man tilts his head forward and to the side to get to the patches of hair behind his ears, scoffing quietly without saying anything further.

He hears the door closing in the hallway and Isabel runs in, jumping on the bed with her shoes on and lying down on her stomach to watch them and catch her breath. She’s eating a slice of bread, a gift from Frau Gernhardt no doubt, and her face is glowing with excitement as she asks for the time, causing Farlan to swear as the clippers slip and a few longer hairs fall slowly onto the floor.

“Sorry,” he mutters to Levi, who grunts his reply.

“Is Erwin coming to get us soon?” Isabel asks now, and it seems strange to Levi she would call the man by his name, though he’s not sure why.

“Not for another few hours,” Farlan tells her, sounding annoyed. “You sound just like Hanna and Bruno when you ask that.”

Isabel makes a face at him before turning to Levi. "Is the cottage far, big brother?" she asks him now and he shakes his head carefully, still making Farlan cluck disapprovingly.

"It'll take us maybe two hours by car," he explains. "Are you nervous?"

She shakes her head vigorously. "I've been a lot further than that," she says before her expression grows distant; it's something Levi has learned to expect when she talks about her past and he doesn't question her further.

"I suppose it's good you two aren't," Farlan mutters almost more to himself as he moves over to the other side of Levi's head.

"It'll be so great," Isabel says, leaning her chin to her hands. "Erwin told me there's a farm nearby. He said he can take me there to see the animals if I want."

"He did?" Levi asks, surprised and Isabel nods again, rolling onto her back.

"I was thinking I'd ask whether they have any work for someone like me," she tells them. "Not for right now but later, when the war ends. This is such a good place to live."

"Why do you like farms so much?" Farlan asks her sullenly. "My parents took me to a farm when I was younger and all it did was make my nose itch and my eyes water."

"I like being around animals," Isabel replies dreamily. "They're not like people. They never hurt you if you treat them right."

The next few hours slip by in a kind of anxious anticipation with Farlan pacing restlessly around the apartment and Levi and Isabel trying to guess where their destination is most likely to be on a map of Dresden and its surroundings. They follow the Elbe with their fingers, peering down at the lines of roads by its banks, finding landmarks and wondering whether they'll see them from the windows of the car as they drive past. Levi lets his mind catch something of Isabel's excitement and even without considering the upcoming mission he starts to feel enthusiastic about this, his first ever trip to the country, a proper sort of holiday the like of which he never thought he'd get to experience.

When they finally hear the knocking on the door, Isabel jumps up from the bed and hurries to answer it, greeting Erwin loudly as he steps in, hatless but wearing his grey uniform. For the first time Levi doesn't mind it much, realising how it must look to the neighbours, though he can sense in Farlan's fumbling with his suitcase it does nothing to calm the man's nerves. Levi swings his own duffel bag on his shoulder before locking the door and following his friends down the stairs. He runs into Erwin on the second floor where he's stopped to wait for him.

"You've cut your hair," the man says quietly, but his words still echo in the stairwell.

Levi runs his fingers across the stubbly undercut and nods without saying anything, remembering how Erwin's memory works, every detail recorded perfectly, like a photograph

in his mind. Feeling the prickly hair under his fingers Levi suddenly remembers and pushes his hand into his pocket, handing the man his razor hesitantly, for some reason feeling reluctant to let it go.

“I took it from your washstand on Tuesday,” he admits quietly as Erwin looks at him, perplexed. “I guess it made me feel a bit better about the whole thing.”

“I wondered where that had got to,” the man voices, shifting his weight on his feet. “I already went out and bought a new one. You should keep it.”

“Really?” Levi asks him, smoothing the mock ivory handle with his thumb.

“It’s not a family heirloom,” Erwin tells him with a smile, closing his hand around Levi’s for an instant, warm and large against his own. “Besides, it fits well in your hand.”

Levi nods at the man wordlessly before putting the razor back and they descend the rest of the stairs in silence, emerging into the warm sunlight in front of the building where Erwin has left a car; Levi recognises it from their first mission and he wishes he could ask the man whose it is. Isabel and Farlan are hovering by the trunk, however, and Erwin walks over to open it, helping them with their luggage before climbing into the car. They follow him quickly, Levi joining him at the front while Farlan and Isabel shuffle into the back seat. When he looks up at the building, Levi sees several faces peering down at them through parted curtains and he nods in acknowledgement, making the nosy neighbours disappear – all but Frau Niemeyer who stares back but doesn’t return his greeting.

When Erwin finally turns the key in the ignition Isabel can hardly stay still and Farlan’s hands are clutching his knees so tightly Levi is surprised not to hear the sound of bones cracking over the roar of the engine as they drive down the street and through the city. Levi follows the houses floating by his window, shielding his eyes from the afternoon sun, not sure how and who to be around both Erwin and his friends. The only one who seems completely sure of herself is Isabel, who keeps pointing at buildings and asking what they’re for, content with the explanations Erwin is seemingly pleased to provide her with in the midst of shifting gears and steering. As far as Levi knows, Farlan hasn’t said a word since the man’s arrival, and from his behaviour Levi can only assume he intends to keep things that way.

They’re barely five kilometres out of the city when they come to a roadblock, a heavy boom fitted on poles with two young soldiers standing guard, their rifles leaning against a little guardsman’s booth as they kick around a football. Erwin brings the car to a halt and nods to the soldiers before turning to Isabel and Farlan, whose face has turned ashen.

“I’ll be right back,” he tells them calmly, looking almost cheerful. “I’ll call for you if it’s necessary.”

“Alright,” Isabel agrees instantly while Farlan barely manages a weak nod.

Levi watches Erwin getting out of the car and walking over to the soldiers, who have stopped playing and, upon seeing the man’s uniform, have turned to him with identical salutes, which

Erwin dismisses almost absently. He pulls his cigarette case out of his pocket and lights one, offering the rest to the other men who both accept gladly. Levi can barely hear the conversation they're having over Farlan's heavy breathing and Isabel's restless fidgeting. Erwin seems to be expressing his sympathies for the soldiers having been posted here when they could be drinking beer and flirting with girls in the Albertstadt. They agree hesitantly, gaining courage from his grin.

"It's the same with this one," Erwin says, nodding toward the car. "The blond one in the back, my cousin's kid. I told her I'd take him to the country, teach him to shoot before they send him to the front."

"I see. Is he going soon then?" one of the soldiers asks, peering into the car and waving his hand clumsily, a gesture that gets no response from any of them.

"Monday," Erwin grunts, taking a deep drag off his cigarette and exhaling slowly. "I told my cousin he'd be better off getting drunk and being up to his balls in some broad come morning but she didn't want to hear any of that."

The soldiers glance at each other and chuckle almost incredulously like finding it hard to believe an officer would be saying such things, especially in the presence of what Levi guesses are low-ranking infantrymen.

"Jesus Christ," Farlan mutters under his breath on the back seat and Levi turns to shush him quietly.

"You two know what I'm talking about, don't you?" Erwin asks the soldiers, who both hurry to nod.

"Oh, yeah. Absolutely," the other one confirms, exhaling a cloud of smoke, "and I do agree with you, sir, he'd have been much better off. They'll teach him to shoot where he's going alright, but the women... Well, he's not likely to see many of those out there."

Erwin agrees with a curt nod. "It'll be a sad day for the ladies of Dresden when I leave the Personalhauptamt, I can tell you that much."

"You're with the Personalhauptamt, Herr Sturmbannführer?" one of soldiers asks and Erwin grunts again dismissively.

"Though I have to admit I've had enough of cosy desk jobs," he confides conversationally and smokes on. "It'll feel better to hold a gun instead of a pen again. But you know how it is, we all go where we're needed and do what we're told. Isn't that right?"

The soldiers nod along to his words eagerly as he takes a last long inhale of his cigarette before dropping it on the dusty road and crushing it with the heel of his boot. He then sighs almost wearily and pulls out the cigarette case again, offering it to the soldiers a second time.

"Go on, another one for the road," he tells them and they each take one hesitantly. "I feel so sorry for you poor bastards."

“Thank you, Herr Sturmbannführer,” they say in a chorus as Erwin nods for the last time before turning back towards the car, stopping suddenly after opening the door, his hand in his pocket again.

“I almost forgot to show you boys my papers,” he says, taking a few steps toward the soldiers until one of them waves his hand.

“It’s alright,” he calls from the boom. “Just drive on through.”

Erwin waves back as a thank you before stepping into the car and starting the engine, driving slowly past the roadblock, gathering speed as they reach the open road. Levi takes a deep breath of relief, noticing the scent of cigarette smoke the man has brought in with him.

“If only it were always so easy,” Erwin mutters as he turns onto a smaller road. “I could probably drive you all the way to the Channel.”

Levi glances at him before turning to look at Farlan and Isabel. “You alright?” he asks quietly, giving Isabel’s emphatic nod a smile as a response.

“Could I have a cigarette?” Farlan inquires, raising his voice to carry over the roar of the engine. “Please?”

Levi can see Erwin glancing at the man’s ashen face through the rear view mirror before handing him the cigarette case and a pack of matches, which Farlan accepts, his hands shaking so badly he’s barely able to light the smoke. When he finally does, he closes his eyes after the first tentative inhales, filling the inside of the car with each breath and making Isabel cough.

“Roll down the window,” Levi tells him and he obeys after wiping quickly at his brow with his right hand, leaning his head nearly out of the car before taking another drag.

Isabel shifts closer to the middle of the back seat and props her cheek against the back of Levi’s. “Erwin?” she asks quietly, waiting for a sound of acknowledgement from the man before continuing. “What does ‘up to his balls’ mean?”

Next to her Farlan begins to cough so violently that for nearly half a minute Erwin doesn’t need to worry about answering. Levi raises his eyebrows at the look of discomfort on the man’s face as Farlan pulls his head back inside the car, swearing softly.

“I dropped the cigarette,” he mutters as Erwin clears his throat.

“You shouldn’t worry about it, Isabel,” he replies evasively. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for my crudeness.”

Levi can hear Isabel whispering the question to Farlan after returning to her seat, but he busies himself with the car window and leaves her without a reply. They all fall silent for a long while and Levi turns his eyes on the landscape rolling by, following the variation of forests and fields with fluctuating interest as other cars swish past in the opposite direction. He’s reminded of the train ride from Berlin to Dresden all those years ago, when he met

Farlan who was, if possible, even more nervous then than he is now. His focus didn't stay on the surroundings then either; he was trying to make a plan for the rest of his life, for finding lodgings, for finding work. Running into Farlan then was nearly enough to make Levi believe in God after all, since it meant he didn't need to spend his first nights in the city huddled under a bridge somewhere.

They drive through a small town, stopping by a guest house to stretch their legs and use the lavatories, though Farlan refuses to do either and remains in the car, asking Erwin for another cigarette and smoking it keenly, leaning his arms on the frame of the window. Levi follows Isabel as she runs into the ladies' room, entering the gents' and finding Erwin standing by the urinal taking a piss. When he hears the door opening behind him the man turns back, stopping to stare at Levi, who realises from the look on the man's face that he remembers it too. The thought hasn't crossed Levi's mind before and it strikes him as odd now how differently a situation such as that could have ended just a handful of years earlier. They look at each other for a moment, expressions somewhere between embarrassed and amused before Levi walks into one of the stalls and closes the door before relieving his bladder. When he walks out to wash his hands, he finds Erwin doing the same.

"I wanted to talk to you in private," Erwin whispers, his words barely audible beyond the running of the water, clarifying unnecessarily, "About the mission, that is."

"What of it?" Levi asks back, running the water over his hands. "Don't tell me you're calling it off again."

"No, nothing of the sort," Erwin assures him quietly, forcing soap under his fingernails. "According to my calculations the walk up to the tracks should take us about an hour and a half, but the closer to the time of departure of the train we wait the better, since it will leave the enemy very little time to make sure the rails are intact."

"Just out of curiosity," Levi puts in, "have you calculated the chance of success for this little endeavour?"

"Personally I'm feeling very optimistic about it," Erwin tells him with a smile, "and of course your presence only improves the odds."

"Of course," Levi drawls lazily, sneering slightly at the compliment. "I suppose I shouldn't be fooled into thinking of this as a holiday."

"Oh, I don't know," the man replies cheerfully. "After all, it's how we want it to look, isn't it? I don't see any reason for not committing to that role."

Levi scoffs. "You'd know all about committing to roles," he says. "Too bad we can't find you a broad on such short notice. You could get balls deep in her and perfect your performance."

"Amusing as ever, I see," Erwin barely mutters as he exits the bathroom with Levi hard on his heels.

For the next half an hour Erwin and Isabel fill the car with lively conversation to which Levi contributes on occasion while Farlan stays quiet, for a reason that could just as easily be bad

mood or exhaustion. Watching him Levi can imagine what he must have been like ten odd years ago, sitting in his parents' car while they drove to Rügen from Berlin for a week or two in the summer and in his image of young Farlan Levi adds a book of German poetry in his lap with a secret letter tucked safely between the pages. He'd like to ask if the picture he has drawn in his mind is in any way accurate, but looking at the man's weary expression he eventually decides against it.

"Do any of you know this part of the country well?" Erwin asks them all suddenly and Levi shakes his head, his knowledge of his home country being limited to a select few neighbourhoods in Berlin and most of the main city of Dresden.

"I came camping here once when I was in the Hitlerjugend," Farlan tells him to Levi's surprise. "I remember because it was November and some of the older boys stripped me naked and wouldn't let me back in the tent before I had memorised the opening paragraph of Mein Kampf. When I told one of the supervisors he said they'd done it to teach me a lesson, and that I should learn from it."

For a moment the car is filled with a silence that feels uncomfortable to Levi, who looks at Erwin's furrowed brow as the man mulls over the words it seems. "When I moved to Germany I was already too old for the Jugend," he replies, "but I've heard they have that practice. I guess it's supposed to separate the weak members of the pack. Just another example of the destructive delusions of Nazi ideology."

"What do you mean by that?" Farlan asks him, leaning closer to the front of the car to hear him better.

"I simply mean that even without war, the society the Nazis are trying to build is unsustainable," he explains. "Even if Germany could win the war, there could never be a thousand year Reich as Hitler sees it. An unhappy, uncooperative society can never be a productive one, especially if it relies on slave labour, which halts progress and ingenuity. Moreover, a society run on fear and control functions best with an external threat. What would that be if the Soviet Union, Britain and America were all defeated, with fascist Italy and Spain the only parts of Europe not within the borders of the Reich? Africa? Asia? They're too distant to catch the public's interest in the same way the Red Army does. And now that the Reich is supposedly free of Jews and Bolsheviks and other undesirables there is no one left for the Nazis to blame on the inside either."

"I have to say, I'm not sure I agree with you," Farlan replies after a moment's hesitation. "I don't think most people are unhappy under Nazi rule – I actually think most people find they're better off than they were before. I don't see why that would change just because we'd not be surrounded by hostile armies."

"But you can't deny that people are frightened," Erwin counters calmly, "and people who live in constant fear can never be truly happy. When all the most blatant dissidents – Jews, communists, homosexuals and so on – have been cleared out the social control will turn on whoever is left. People will be encouraged to turn each other in for the slightest digressions from the doctrine, which will increase fear and suspicion and make people perform rather than live. After all, I'm sure we can all agree that the Aryan superhuman does not and cannot

exist as a natural variation of the human species. Setting a whole nation up to fail at reaching an impossible standard will not produce a self-sustaining society.”

“But you just contradicted yourself,” Farlan argues, shifting a bit closer again. “You just said a society run on fear needs an external threat, but the fear you spoke of just now was all internal.”

“A society run on control and external fear can function for a long time,” Erwin tells him, “because it relies on a dichotomy of a perceived us against a perceived them. External fear binds a society together, gives people a common purpose, a common enemy, strengthening its faith in its present power structures. In the absence of a perceived them, a society based on extreme forms of social control turns against itself, especially a society where everyone is encouraged not only by general norms but by the government to fit into a ready-made mould, and making distinctions between groups of people becomes more difficult. Furthermore, a nation defined by its military will find it difficult to keep up its hyper masculine ideals without the active need for men to defend the country.”

“Again, I don’t agree,” Farlan says and Levi can hardly believe he’s smiling; the conversation reminds him of Kenny and his rabbis and he’s not pleased to realise he understands even less of it now than he did ten years ago, if possible. “Most people aren’t made unhappy by being told there’s a certain role for them to fill. Most people are perfectly content fitting a mould and performing a role.”

“You’re right about that,” Erwin agrees, taking a few seconds to peer at a road sign. “People can be encouraged to perform certain roles relatively easily through expectations and ideals and through socializing them to follow the norms prevalent in society. Manipulation of art, literature, films, even advertising can be used for this purpose, and I think it’s clear the Nazis have done so from the beginning, not only by producing their own propaganda but by limiting people’s chances for being exposed to anything contradicting their dogma.”

“So you admit that through effective propaganda people can be made to believe they’re happy performing functions in a society relying on extreme forms of social control?”

Erwin takes a long time to consider his next words. “I think it would work for a while,” he finally admits, “but I can’t see even that as a sustainable solution. I think there’s always a part of a person that is free and unique, a part which resists all attempts to be defined by an outside force. There is no propaganda strong enough to suffocate this feature in humanity neither collectively nor individually.”

“I feel like you’re talking about the soul and worse yet, some kind of a world soul,” Farlan says, his tone almost accusing, “and if that’s the case, I’m afraid the conversation is getting too theoretical for me.”

Erwin utters a laugh. “I have to say, it’s been too long since I’ve had the opportunity to have a discussion like this,” he says smiling. “I’d forgotten how much I enjoy it.”

“I also think it’s simply too strange hearing someone like you stating opinions like that,” Farlan responds and scoffs. “It’s like seeing the Führer with sidelocks.”

Erwin laughs again. “Now there’s an image,” he says, turning to Levi. “Did you ever have those?”

Levi sneers. “No,” he tells the man simply, trying to ignore Farlan shifting restlessly in the back seat; it has been a long time since any of them has referred to it so blatantly. “What kind of a stupid fucking question is that?”

“I’m sorry, I suppose it was rather silly of me to assume,” Erwin says, smiling apologetically. “What university did you go to?” he asks Farlan next, and the man seems pleased, not only with Erwin assuming something like this about him but also with the change of subject.

“The Frederick William University in Berlin,” he replies. “I was doing a degree in literature.”

“That must have been very interesting. And in such a prestigious school,” Erwin says, glancing into the rear view mirror again. “I’m sorry you weren’t able to finish your studies.”

Farlan dismisses the comment with a wave of his hand, which catches Levi’s attention in its sudden effeminacy. “Never mind that,” he barely says, leaning back in his seat.

“Are we there yet?” Isabel speaks out suddenly, making Erwin laugh again.

“Soon,” he tells her gently and glances at Levi who can’t help smiling as well; suddenly it all feels like a genuine holiday, or at least what Levi has always imagined genuine holidays to be like.

For the last ten minutes they drive along a small dirt road that’s nearly overgrown with tufts of grass and green patches of clovers between two ruts leading up to the cottage; Levi can see glimpses of the moss-covered roof through the foliage as they get close and he finds it difficult to hide his excitement. He glances at Farlan and Isabel, who has rolled open her window and closed her eyes, smelling the fresh forest air. When Erwin finally stops the car she’s the first to jump out, leaving the luggage to Levi as she runs in through the waist-high gate on the wooden fence that circles the garden, kneeling immediately by the weed-filled vegetable patch to take a closer look at the stalks sticking up from the dirt.

Levi swings the duffel bag on his shoulder before grabbing one of the large paper bags full of groceries that Erwin has brought with him from the city. He hands the other one to Farlan, who seems somewhat dismayed but surrenders to his fate when he sees Erwin struggling with the old rusty lock on the door. When he finally gets it open, he needs to bend his neck slightly to fit in through the low frame while the rest of them follow him in, Farlan much less apprehensively than Levi would have thought.

“Reminds me of all those fairy tales. You know, the ones where the children get trapped by witches and nearly burned alive,” he still mutters to Levi, who sighs.

“They had happy endings, though,” he reminds the man, who agrees sullenly, laying his suitcase on the floor.

They have entered into a sitting room of sorts with dark timbers criss-crossing against a high ceiling painted white and a curving stair to their immediate right ascending to a sort of balcony overlooking the space, which feels cool after the heat of the car. Levi counts two doors, an open one across the room through which he can see a small kitchen, and another one in the corner under the stairs. Opposite of it is a large fireplace with a selection of English-style leather armchairs and a sofa in front with a chessboard and two chairs in the left-hand side corner. A few simple soft rugs have been thrown on the dark wooden floor, the colour of which is echoed in the panelling of the walls that's paired with a striped forest-green wallpaper. To Levi it doesn't seem like a huntsman's cottage until he spots a set of antlers on the wall next to an old painting depicting dogs and horses with men blowing in bugles on their backs. Levi brushes a finger against the polished wooden railing of the stairs, happily surprised at the relatively small amount of dust it gathers, before walking further in and dropping his bag on the sofa on his way to the kitchen where Farlan follows him with the food.

Levi places the paper bag onto an old wood-burning stove standing in front of a masonry oven built with red bricks, giving the rest of the room a once over: a small rectangular table and four chairs, a cracked porcelain sink below three cupboards, a hatch into a cellar in front of the window across the room and a plate shelf above a small maid's bed behind the door. There's another door between the sink and the window that leads into the garden and one more in the corner at the foot of the bed. Levi walks over to it and peers into a dark bathroom, the painted planks of the kitchen turning into flat stone slabs at the threshold. There's no toilet seat, just a simple washstand with a mirror above, a large brass bathtub along the furthest wall and a wood stove water heater in the corner.

"No witches," he says, turning to Farlan who rolls his eyes as Erwin strides in, his boot-clad feet making a loud stomping noise against the wooden floor.

"I thought we'd all like to settle in first," he says. "I'm sure I'm not the only one who finds he'd be more comfortable if I were wearing anything else but this."

Farlan nods wordlessly as Levi scoffs. "It's not exactly a pleasure looking at you right now."

For a moment Erwin seems about to say something, but in the end he merely utters a laugh. "No, I suppose not," he states, frowning slightly. "As for the sleeping arrangements, in addition to this bed in the kitchen there are two bedrooms, one up and one downstairs. I assume you two would like the prior."

Levi looks at Farlan whose eyebrows have climbed a fair bit closer to his floppy hair. "Why would you assume that?" he asks the man.

"Well," Erwin replies, and it seems like he finds it odd having to explain himself, "it has more privacy compared to the other rooms, which I thought you two might appreciate."

Levi looks again at Farlan, who seems to be holding back laughter, his lips pursed into a wide smile as an awkward silence fills the kitchen.

"Ah, I'm sorry," Erwin finally says, clearing his throat as his gaze shifts between the two of them. "It seems I have misread something here."

“I’ll sleep in the kitchen,” Levi decides firmly as Farlan turns to look out the window. “It’ll be a nice change for Isabel to sleep in a real bedroom.”

“No, please, you’re my guest,” Erwin hurries to object. “Let me sleep in the kitchen. You can take the other bedroom.”

“Which one of us is going to fit better into that bed, you or me?”

Erwin looks at the little maid’s bed and seems to reconsider.

“Are you sure—”

“Yes,” Levi tells him curtly. “Now stop making a fuss about it. I’ve slept in places much worse than this room, believe me.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” the man agrees, exhaling loudly. “I suppose I’ll go and change.”

Farlan turns to Levi as soon as the man is gone, his eyebrows still raised like he’s demanding an explanation of some sort.

“I never said anything to him about you,” Levi tells him quietly. “I guess it’s not such a strange conclusion to come to, seeing how we live.”

“Don’t worry,” Farlan replies. “It’s not strange that a man like him would notice. And you’re right – it’s not an unfounded conclusion to come to, and not so far from the truth, in some aspects at least.” He makes to exit the kitchen, turning back at the door. “I guess you were right. He is a lot more like us than one would think.”

Levi can hear him climbing up the stairs as he starts unpacking the groceries, descending into the small cellar to place the perishables and the bottle of wine onto the shelves before going through the cupboards and finding a bucket and a few tattered rags in the one under the sink. He gets to cleaning right away, choosing a duster and starting on the horizontal surfaces. When he moves on to the sitting room, Erwin emerges from the door under the stairs, frowning at Levi instantly.

“There’s really no need for you to work this weekend,” he tells Levi almost sternly. “I thought we agreed, this is supposed to be a holiday.”

“I’ll feel better when the place is clean,” Levi replies, looking over the slacks and plain white shirt the man is wearing and smiling.

“Well at least let me help you,” Erwin insists just as Isabel runs in from the garden with large brown stains on her knees.

“Erwin,” she breathes hastily. “Can you come and tell me what all these plants are?”

The man glances at Levi who nods toward the door. “Of course,” he tells the girl and follows her out of the cottage; Levi can hear them talking as he wipes down the windowsills, going over the flora fighting its way through the weeds.

After dusting and sweeping the floors, Levi stops to help Farlan get started on dinner. They go out into the garden together through the door in the kitchen, finding a small well by the orchard and a woodshed next to a privy at the edge of the forest. They fill their arms with dry logs before returning to the kitchen where Levi leaves Farlan to build a fire in the stove and rummage through the cupboards in search of pots and skillets. He finds another bucket in the bathroom, walking out to the well and filling them before pouring the water into the large container of the heater, already dreaming of a hot bath. He's barely out the door to refill the buckets when Erwin and Isabel circle the house and the man demands Levi to let him help and spends the next quarter hour walking back and forth from the well while Levi lights a fire in the stove to heat the water. They then join Isabel at the kitchen table where she's peeling and chopping onions for Farlan, who's busy poking at the burning logs and moving iron plates around the cooktop to keep the pot of potatoes from boiling over.

They eat their dinner in good spirits, Levi, Farlan and Erwin have a glass of wine each with their sausage, potatoes, fried onions and a thin yet tasty gravy. The other two men argue about politics and philosophy again while Isabel tells Levi about the garden. After dinner Levi does the dishes, listening half-heartedly to Erwin and Farlan continuing their conversation in the sitting room while Erwin lights a fire in the hearth. Isabel has found an old book about botany in the bookshelf and is reading through it, interrupting Farlan's arguments every now and then to ask him about the meanings of the longer words she doesn't know.

"Ask Levi," Farlan finally huffs when he joins them on the sofa, clearly annoyed by the constant interference.

"I don't know any big words either," Levi tells him truthfully, having stopped listening to their discussion when it ceased making sense to him. "Not everyone has studied at university, you know."

"What sort of education have you received?" Erwin asks him suddenly, seeming genuinely interested; the warmth of the fire has turned his cheeks red, and Levi can see dark blotches under his arms again.

"I can read and write and count to a hundred," Levi says, exaggerating his own lack of knowledge and ignoring Farlan rolling his eyes behind Erwin's back. "What more could someone like me possibly need?"

"Did you ever think to learn a trade?"

"My uncle had a small shop in Berlin," Levi tells the man, aware of the bitterness in his voice. "He taught me how to run it and how to keep the books. Clearly even the idea of me taking over that crummy little shit hole was overreaching."

"I see," Erwin replies quietly. "I assume your education was cut short by the Law against Overcrowding in Schools and Universities."

"I never really liked reading anyway," Levi barely states and he's not sure whether he's lying or not. Orphaned sons of whores don't get far in life – Kenny was always the first to remind him – and dreaming about anything better than a roof over your head and food in your belly

was never meant for people like them. Even so, without ever having seriously considered becoming anything much, Levi feels anger and disappointment at being denied the option.

“What about you, Isabel?” Farlan suddenly speaks up and it seems to Levi like he’s trying to change the subject, since asking Isabel about her past has seldom yielded results before. “Did you go to school?”

“Sometimes,” she replies to Levi’s surprise. “In the winter, mostly. And my auntie taught me to read and write other times. She had a bad leg.”

“Did you like school?” Farlan goes on after a moment of stunned silence.

She shakes her head. “I don’t like sitting still for too long,” she explains, flipping through the pages of the book. “I think it’s bad for you.”

“I think you’re right about that,” Erwin agrees with her, stretching his back. “I sit down at the office all day and it never did me any good.”

“Just from looking at you I’d never think you have a desk job,” Farlan says, turning to Erwin and taking a sip from his glass of wine. “You must take exercise at least.”

Erwin utters a laugh. “Why, thank you. I do swim regularly.”

Farlan smiles into his glass without saying anything but Levi catches him casting a glance in his direction as he looks back at him, frowning at the flirtation that seems entirely misplaced. Even so the image of Erwin diving into a pool of still, turquoise water comes to Levi uninvited and he lets it, appreciates the cleanness of it, the unbroken surface seconds before impact, the stiffness of the man’s muscles as he bends into the jump. Maybe it’s a picture that has buried itself inside his mind years ago and found this moment to pierce through. When Levi looks at Erwin again the redness of his cheeks looks suddenly like a blush, like he’s guessed Levi’s thoughts and found them as embarrassing as he himself does, these feelings that seem to belong to a different time.

The rest of the evening seems to crawl by slowly; there are no clocks on the walls or shelves and Levi wishes he had a watch to keep track of time. He tries to get as much rest as he can in preparation for the sleepless night ahead but just like Isabel, he’s not used to staying still for long, and as the minutes pass Levi starts anxiously looking for signs of his friends growing tired. When Farlan and Erwin light their cigarettes, Levi escapes into the kitchen, thinking to draw himself a bath to pass the time and getting to work after lighting a handful of candles in the otherwise dark bathroom. Carrying in more water from the well for the tub takes him long enough for Farlan to come and see what he’s doing; the man doesn’t offer to help him, simply leans onto the sink and watches Levi walking back and forth, sweating from the warmth of the night and the strain of the task.

“I think I’m starting to see what you see,” he tells Levi quietly when he finally drops the last full buckets by the water heater.

“About what?” Levi asks him, and Farlan nods wordlessly toward the sitting room.

“He reminds me of people I used to know,” the man says, glancing behind himself. “Or maybe he reminds me of who I used to be. He’s a good conversationalist.”

“You two do like to run your mouths, don’t you?” Levi mutters irritably, making Farlan frown.

“You’re not jealous, are you?” he asks in a whisper, voice filled with genuine curiosity.

“Why would I be?” Levi asks him back, though something about Farlan’s words makes him wonder. Is it really just bitterness from being denied an education that’s making him annoyed, or has Erwin’s behaviour around Farlan reminded him of all the ways in which their lives are different?

Farlan shrugs. “I really don’t know,” he says lazily. “I mean, you just work for him, don’t you?”

Levi meets the man’s eyes without hesitation. “Yes,” he replies emphatically. “I do just work for him.”

“Then I’m sure there’s no problem,” Farlan states firmly. “Do try and enjoy yourself. I thought that’s what this weekend was supposed to be about.”

As he closes the bathroom door behind himself and starts drawing water from the heater for his bath, Levi considers the question again, trying to keep his mind level. Even so it’s difficult to pinpoint what it is about Farlan’s behaviour that he finds so irritating, if not the insinuations which Erwin’s earlier misinterpretation did nothing to help. As he empties the buckets one at a time into the tub making steam rise to meet his face, Levi feels as though his thoughts are like the hot bucket he’s holding, impossible to grasp comfortably without burning your fingers. Casting them both aside he undresses, stopping suddenly when he hears a soft thump as his trousers hit the cool grey stones. He lifts them up and thrusts his hand in the pocket, pulling out the razor and uncovering the blade, running his thumb carefully along its smooth edge.

Without casting another glance toward the bathtub, Levi fills the washbowl in front of the small mirror on the wall, discovering a tin of shaving soap and a brush in the small drawer of the stand. He splashes water on his face, hands tracing the faint hint of a stubble on his cheeks before taking the brush and adding a generous coating of white foam down toward and on his neck. He lifts the razor to his skin, running it across the beginnings of a beard, shivering as drops of soap start running down his chest and over his abdomen, quickly reaching his thighs on their unobstructed paths. The blade feels good in his hand, extremely sharp but secure, so much so he can almost believe he will never cut himself using it. He finds this act of shaving to be grounding, slowing him down and forcing his focus on something tangible and practical. Having to be mindful of the cuts and bruises on his face only adds to the feeling and when he finally slips into the tub Levi feels a slight strain on the muscles of his neck and shoulders.

The warm water envelopes him, soothing and cleansing, and though Levi knows he’s likely to get his hands dirty later, he lets the thought drift away as the heat purges his skin. As he looks through the surface at his naked body obscured by the shadows falling over the room,

he can't help but wonder what flash of insanity possessed his mother when she decided to have him be circumcised. Was she really still so obedient to tradition after having been cast aside by her own people? Levi finds it difficult to understand having never felt that sense of belonging, having never wanted that, but if her brother's behaviour was any indication, Levi supposes it's not an easy thing to escape in the end. He runs his thumb along the scar tentatively and something about it feels like he's doing it for the first time and just like then, he stops before he's really started, pinning his hands between his elbows and sides instead – even now the comfort feels better than the pleasure.

He stays in the tub for as long as the warmth still lingers in the water, finally leaving the bathroom relaxed yet reluctant, remembering his life in Berlin where those long Sunday night baths were the only ritual Levi obeyed with a near religious devotion. As soon as he hears Isabel and Farlan's voices from the sitting room, the same restlessness starts to take over Levi and he begins to wonder what time it is. As he hangs his towel to dry over the backrest of a chair, Erwin stomps his way into the kitchen from the garden, his arms full of logs from the woodshed.

"I thought I'd take some upstairs," he explains without Levi asking, "just in case it gets cold during the night."

It takes another few hours for Farlan to start nodding off in the corner of the sofa and climb tiredly up the stairs with Isabel dragging behind, leaning over the railing to wish them both a good night before disappearing into the bedroom. Next to Levi Erwin yawns as well, his half-open eyes staring at the embers glowing in the fireplace, but despite the warmth and comfort Levi feels wide awake, glancing at Erwin's wristwatch every now and again impatiently.

"You should get some rest too," the man whispers to him soon after Isabel and Farlan have left the room. "Go and sleep for a few hours. I'll wake you when it's time."

Levi shakes his head. "I'm not tired," he barely states and Erwin doesn't insist. "Besides, you look like you need it more than I do."

Erwin utters a laugh. "Yes, well," he mutters, "I must admit, I didn't get much sleep last night."

Levi raises an eyebrow, suddenly remembering the way Lilian tilted her head back when she laughed. "Right," he says and scoffs. "If you want to sleep you should go ahead."

The man seems to consider his options for a moment before removing his wristwatch and handing it to Levi. "If I'm not up in three hours, come and wake me," he says before pushing to his feet and disappearing through the door under the stairs.

In his absence Levi tries to lie down on the sofa to rest, his eyes glued on the clock face as he watches the seconds go by, trying not to think and thinking nonetheless, about the mission, about Isabel and Farlan asleep upstairs, about Erwin pulling at Lilian's clothes, smearing her lipstick with his mouth, guiding her toward his bed like he did with that Nazi officer. That night seems very distant to Levi now, though it's only been a few months since then.

He tears his eyes off the watch to let his gaze circle the room again, the dark wooden furniture, the antlers on the wall, the dull shine of the railing of the stairs and he gets to his feet jerkily. He walks around the cottage by the light of a candle, first looking at the books in the shelf, then looking through the cupboards in the kitchen again, even descending into the cellar before walking out to the privy to take a shit. He wanders restlessly around the outside of the cottage, under the heavy branches of the apple trees in the orchard, peering down into the black depths of the well before returning indoors and continuing his restless pacing until he can no longer stand it.

He opens the door to the bedroom carefully and quietly before stepping in, enveloped in an instant by a warm, musty scent of sleep. He can see Erwin's shape on the bed, his quiet breathing magnified by the surrounding silence. Levi steps closer, looking down through the darkness at the bare chest rising and falling, the dusting of hair under the man's arm, the defined features peaceful in sleep. He reaches down slowly, placing a gentle hand on Erwin's shoulder, calling out his name in a low, hoarse whisper. His eyes open at once, focusing instantly on Levi, who pulls back his hand reluctantly.

"What time is it?" Erwin asks, sitting up in the bed and rubbing at his eyes.

"It's barely one," Levi replies quietly. "Can we go?"

The man seems to process the information, stretching his neck and groaning at the strain. "We should wait a while longer," he replies. "The longer we're gone the greater the chance that your friends will—"

"I don't care," Levi says, knowing he should. "I want to go, now."

Erwin looks at him through the dark, brows furrowed, like calculating outcomes before nodding slowly. "Alright," he agrees, getting to his feet and rummaging in his leather bag and pulling on a dark green shirt, handing another one to Levi. "You should wear this. The white is too easy to spot."

Levi grabs his own white shirt from the neck and pulls it over his head before dressing himself again, the sleeves coming all the way down to his fingertips.

"Ah, my apologies," Erwin says with a hint of embarrassment laced with laughter in his voice. "The size of it is again—"

"Don't worry about it," Levi interrupts him, rolling the sleeves up to his forearms. "At least it's much better than the last clothes you got me."

They exit the cottage soundlessly after Levi scribbles a hasty note to Farlan and Isabel just in case, a piece of paper that says *stay here* and nothing else. They walk out to the car, Erwin takes a backpack from the trunk and they set off through the forest, the quiet rustle of their footsteps the only sound Levi can hear in the night. They pass through clearings and meadows, the legs of their trousers turning cold and wet from the dew as they march on without speaking until Erwin suddenly stops at the foot of a small hill after what seems like hours to Levi.

“We should be coming up to the tracks soon,” he whispers in the dark, wiping at his brow with the sleeve of his shirt. “I’ll go look ahead. You should stay here.”

Feeling winded, Levi gets off his numb feet and doesn’t argue, accepting the gun Erwin pulls out of his backpack and hands to him, nodding as the man makes sure he knows how to load and fire it. As Erwin takes his leave, Levi leans against the trunk of a large horse chestnut, shuffling lower into the dent between its gnarly roots and breathing in the rich scent of damp earth, shivering as the pre-dawn chill starts setting into his bones. By the time the man returns, Levi is gritting his teeth to keep them from chattering and when Erwin sits down and passes him a flask Levi takes a gulp of the liquor within eagerly.

“We ought to wait for another hour,” the man tells him in a whisper. “As far as I could tell the tracks are not being watched, but that shouldn’t make us too comfortable.”

“Believe me, comfortable is one of the last things I’m feeling right now,” Levi tells him sullenly, folding his arms around himself for warmth while Erwin chuckles quietly.

“It’s a strange place to find oneself,” he muses, taking a sip from the flask and looking around himself at the tall trees.

“Stranger for you, I’d think,” Levi thinks aloud, taking another drink, hesitating for a moment before asking, “Is it very different, where you come from?”

Erwin takes a moment to think. “Yes and no,” he finally replies. “It depends whereabouts in the country you are. But there’s nature much like this.”

“Do you miss it?” Levi asks now, trying to see Erwin’s expression from the blurry profile catching his eye.

“Less now than I used to,” the man tells him and they fall silent, until Erwin speaks up again. “I’m sorry about before. I shouldn’t have assumed—”

“It’s fine,” Levi cuts him short. “It’s not like that between us but I don’t blame you for thinking it, and neither does he.”

“Good,” Erwin whispers, pushing the flask back into the backpack.

“It was a fucking stupid idea, though,” Levi voices, making the other man turn to him with a frown. “It would’ve been a lot harder to sneak out.”

Erwin is quiet for a while before uttering a laugh. “I suppose I didn’t really think it through,” he admits sheepishly. “I guess I focused on trying to improve your stay, since you were so reluctant to join me.”

Levi scoffs but doesn’t speak, feeling a pang of guilt at how quickly he has forgotten the reason behind his reluctance.

“I think you’ve all managed remarkably well,” Erwin tells him gently. “I know this isn’t the time or place for it, but I’d love to know the story behind it, how you all got acquainted.”

“It’s not that long a story,” Levi says, flexing his toes inside his brown leather work boots. “I met Farlan on the train to Dresden – figured he was running since he looked ready to shit himself whenever someone in a uniform walked past – and Isabel came to live with us less than two years ago. She was begging for money in the street–”

“In Dresden?” Erwin asks and Levi nods. “Do you know how she came there?”

“No,” Levi admits quietly. “She rarely talks about anything that happened before. Why?”

“She must have travelled a long way,” the man says. “Her German is good enough but when you listen to her for a while it’s clear it’s not her native language. I noticed it in the garden today. She doesn’t know the names for many plants any German-speaking person her age should know.”

“Where do you think she’s from?” Levi asks, wondering whether this is the reason they were always unable to place her accent.

“I can’t say for sure,” Erwin says. “At first I thought I could hear Slavic traces in the way she speaks, but there’s something about it that doesn’t seem to fit. Not that it narrows it down much either way.”

Levi agrees with a low grunt and they fall silent, not speaking until Erwin nudges his shoulder and gets to his feet; Levi follows his example, barely remembering to grab the gun from where he’s placed it on the ground. They walk more quietly now, trying to sidestep the undergrowth whenever possible as they slip through the darkness. Levi keeps his eyes on his feet and the ending of the forest takes him by surprise when he finally lifts his gaze as he sees Erwin stopping and crouching down by a thicket. The track runs ahead of them, a few metres from the edge of the wood, with the landscape opening to rolling hills beyond.

“I’ll work on the tracks while you keep watch,” Erwin tells him, rummaging through his backpack as Levi changes his hold on the gun. “If I need your help I’ll ask for it.”

Levi nods, feeling a sudden pang of nervousness as a numbness in his limbs as they walk quietly out of the foliage and onto the tracks. Looking around himself, Erwin shines a torch toward the ground as they start walking, stopping and kneeling down when he sees a slab of metal has been bolted onto the rails where the tracks meet. He drops the backpack and goes through it quietly as Levi keeps an eye out, trying to see as far as he can along the rails. He glances behind himself where Erwin has pulled out a crowbar and a large wrench and has set to work detaching the bolts keeping the plates of metal in place, breathing heavily as the rusty screws resist his efforts to loosen them. Levi can feel his heart beating wildly in his chest as the tool makes a low screeching noise that seems to carry far in the silence.

As he struggles to peer through the darkness around him, Levi soon finds his other senses heightening; he can hear every clink and clang of the wrench against the metal, can smell damp wood and wet earth and soon even Erwin’s sweat, can feel the coolness of the air which fails to raise goosebumps on his skin, warmed by nervous excitement. His eyes scan the treeline, jumping restlessly from shadow to shadow, losing the distinction between individual trees a few metres in either direction. Levi squints and tries to hear past the humming of

blood in his ears, but Erwin's laboured breathing keeps stealing his attention as he pulls on the bolts aggressively to remove them.

Just like on the railway yard with Mike, Levi quickly loses track of time and after a while he starts to think the four bolts have taken Erwin close to an hour, though it's impossible to say whether his estimate is even marginally accurate. He keeps glancing back toward the man whose shirt has grown darker from the back as he's sweated through it; the smell of him has nearly taken over all other scents and Levi can see him wiping his brow almost desperately to keep the beads from rolling into his eyes. He grabs one of the bolts tiredly with both hands and pulls it loose, sitting down by the tracks to catch his breath.

"Switch with me for a minute," he tells Levi in a winded whisper, pushing to his feet and accepting the gun to keep watch.

Levi grabs the wrench and fits it around one of the two bolts still left, yanking at the shaft without the bolt so much as nudging. He changes position and pushes, putting all his weight behind the thrust and managing to bring the tool to touch the gravelly ground. After repeating this a mere handful of times, Levi is surrounded by his own stench and as he glances at Erwin he can't help but wonder how much strength the man has in those thick arms of his; the bolt is barely halfway out of the tie-plate. He grits his teeth and keeps working until he feels a soft tap on his shoulder. The gun and the wrench change hands again as Levi stands up, blinking as spots of light blur his field of vision for a moment before the darkness returns more impenetrable than Levi remembered it.

Behind him Erwin continues with the task, the strain making him groan and gasp for air as Levi tries to make his ears do the impossible, to hear the faint rustle of anyone approaching several hundred metres in advance. When he finally hears a metallic thud and Erwin's satisfied grunt, Levi lets out a breath of relief that catches in his throat as he spots a spark of light in the forest, a second of brightness that disappears as soon as he notices it. For a few seconds he hesitates, wondering whether the blood pounding in his head is still clouding his vision.

"I think I saw something," he finally hisses to Erwin, kneeling down next to him and pointing toward the forest as the man stops pulling at the nails on the sleepers. "A light out there."

Erwin's eyes scan the surroundings calmly for a moment before he turns back to his work, tearing at the wood on the planks to fit the crowbar under the head of the nail.

"Keep an eye on it," he says under his breath.

Levi stands up slowly, bringing his left hand to steady the gun in his right as his breathing speeds up and his legs start to feel weak under his weight. He looks over the shadows of the trees, unmoving in the still night air, and every time he hears a loud bang from behind himself he swears he can see the shadows moving. He hears Erwin grunting loudly when he finally manages to fit the crowbar between the gap in the tracks, putting his weight behind it to bring them apart a further few centimetres. Levi tries to make out any other sound beyond it, but his own pulse seems to cover everything Erwin's heaving and moaning doesn't. He moves his finger to the trigger of the gun, squinting toward the section of darkness where he saw the light, his eyes watering as he tries to see.

The gunshot makes the silence ring with the chime of a bullet bouncing off the track, missing Erwin by the length of an arm. Before the man has a chance to turn around Levi has stepped in front of him, the gun suddenly steady in his hand, his breathing falling to a steady, slow rhythm as he looks toward the thicket, seeing nothing but black for two seconds until the someone out there moves, shifting the darkness with him. Only partly aware of himself, Levi aims the gun and fires once before pointing the barrel a fraction lower and firing again. Though he seems to barely hear the echoes of the explosions, Levi can make out every rustle of the brush before an unnatural silence falls over the scene again, and it's all over.

"Give me a hand with this," Erwin tells him without wasting a minute, his hands gripping the crowbar he's wedged between the tracks.

Levi kneels down instantly and drops the gun, positioning his feet against the undamaged rail and bringing his hands close to the small gap. On Erwin's count he starts to push, straightening his legs little by little as the metal starts to give in under their joint efforts. When the man is pleased with the outcome, he finishes the work by stomping the now bent crowbar into the ground between the tracks, leaving a good twenty centimetres of it sticking out to catch the wheels of the train.

As he breathes heavily and wipes his forehead, Levi can smell the musk of Erwin's sweat as the man steps toward and past him, walking into the forest. Levi follows him slowly to where he's stopped to peer past the thicket at the young man lying on his back, eyes staring wide open up at the night sky. It takes Levi a moment to see the uniform but when he does it doesn't make him feel any differently. It seems there's nothing beyond the numbness, no regret, no remorse, just that instinct of eat or be eaten.

"Are you alright?" Erwin asks him and he nods calmly before walking over to the corpse; the bullets ripped through his head and chest, just like Levi intended.

"Someone must have heard the gunshots," he states plainly. "Whatever we decide to do about him we should do it now."

Erwin sighs heavily. "It's more likely now that they'll check the rails again, especially when this one doesn't return from his rounds," he says, sounding suddenly tired. "But I still think our chances of success are greater if they find him somewhere else."

"What do you suggest?" Levi asks, unloading the gun in the few seconds it takes Erwin to decide.

"We should carry him to the river," he says, "and try to cover up this blood with whatever we can."

Levi nods again, unbuttoning the soldier's jacket quickly to rip two long strips of fabric out of his shirt, dividing them in two and sticking all four into the holes left by the bullets, wiping his hand on the man's trousers as Erwin wraps his arms around the body, hoisting it up and laying it down a few metres over. He joins Levi in pulling out branches and turning earth to place on the pools and splashes on the bushes and dirt that in the darkness look like little puddles of oil or ink. After this they start their way back in silence, the corpse dangling grotesquely on Erwin's shoulder as he walks, swinging back and forth with his steps. They

stop to rest more often than once, shifting between carrying the body together and Erwin carrying it alone. It doesn't take it long to start bleeding through the bandages, and by the time they reach the low bank of the river, the stains on Erwin's shirt aren't simply due to perspiration.

Levi falls down on the grass exhausted and soaked with sweat as Erwin lays the corpse down gently before taking a seat. They look out onto the Elbe, which flows calmly onward, reflecting the intense blue of the sky; neither of them says anything, not about the body of the young man next to them nor the mission. Levi breathes deeply, sensing the dawn in the way the world seems empty and new. He wonders whether he should feel bad, or feel something at least, but it seems silly to force something that simply isn't there and he decides it's enough to not feel good about it right now. Next to him Erwin struggles to his feet and looks down at the body impassively.

"Is that where you aimed?" he asks Levi who turns to look at the bloody holes in the young man's head and chest.

"Yes," he replies, equally emotionlessly, sensing a sort of approval in Erwin's nod.

"I'll take it further from the shore," the man whispers, undressing quickly and carrying the body into the water.

Levi watches Erwin grow more distant with each stroke of his arm, staying still until the stench of his body becomes unbearable. He leaves his clothes next to Erwin's and walks down the low bank into the water, the cool suddenly just as cleansing as the warm was before. He keeps an eye on Erwin as he walks deeper, feet feeling for stones on the bottom as he splashes water over his face and arms and neck. He's still washing himself when the man returns and climbs up on the bank and lies down naked and exhausted. Levi doesn't look at him, out of respect or decency or for some other reason entirely, not even when he joins him on the grass to pull on his clothes. Only when he hears Erwin shifting on the ground does he lift his gaze and meet the man's reddened cheeks, the cause for his embarrassment swelling swiftly between his legs.

They look at each other for a few tense seconds before Erwin gets to his feet again and walks back into the river; Levi watches him dive when the water reaches his waist, grateful for the solitude as he fights to get into his trousers. Neither of them says a word on the way back and the silence follows them into the kitchen of the cottage where Levi pulls on a clean shirt, sitting down on the little maid's bed heavily and groaning when Erwin tells him what time it is.

"I'll start getting breakfast ready," the man tells him and smiles. "Try and get some sleep."

The last thing Levi registers before drifting off is a faint rumbling crash, but in his fuddled mind it isn't clear whether it is the distant sound of the train escaping the tracks or of Erwin lighting a fire in the stove.

WARNINGS

- foul language
- death

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Deadline for chapter nine falls on December 18th.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi stretches out his body on the hard mattress of the bed as his mouth opens to a wide yawn that catches Erwin's attention. Erwin turns to look behind himself and smiles in a way that forces Levi to return it as he sits up and presses the soles of his feet against the cool wooden floor of the kitchen, glancing out the window at the garden where the first glimmers of dawn are starting to set fire to the bright green hues of the overgrown grass. A disoriented bumblebee flies into the old glass of the window with a quiet tap before continuing on to the meadow cranesbills growing around the well. The room is quiet save for the muffled crackling of the fire in the charred stove and the chirping of birds outside, two very different sounds that seem to form a perfect harmony to accompany the comfortable silence of the small kitchen.

Levi keeps his eyes on the garden and as thoughts and images from the night start to surface he pushes them gently to the back of his mind. He knows there will be better times for thinking about that, knows there will be sleepless nights in his future that will suit those memories far better than this serene, golden morning. That darkness doesn't belong here, Levi thinks to himself as he lifts his arms above his head to stretch his back, not to this one day he's decided to allow himself to be entirely free of misery. He turns his gaze on Erwin who is watching over the fire, turning the chair he has drawn closer to the stove so he can see Levi when he finally breaks the silence.

"How long was I asleep for?" Levi asks Erwin in a voice still hoarse from sleep.

"Only about an hour," the man replies, still smiling faintly, "but it seems to me you slept soundly enough."

Levi scoffs, pulling his shoes onto his bare feet before running his fingers quickly through his hair. "Is that your way of telling me I snore?" he asks Erwin, who laughs, sounding a touch embarrassed.

"In the most moderate way possible," he assures Levi jokingly, "but yes, you do indeed snore."

Levi utters a quiet laugh as he stands up slowly and makes his way to the door. "You should've heard yourself last night," he counters amusedly. "I've heard thunderstorms that are quieter than you."

He steps outside into the garden, breathing in the fresh morning air and its scent of damp grass and birch trees as he walks along the small footpath to the privy and back. On either side he can see cobwebs, spun between longer stems of flowers during the night and laden with drops of dew that reflect small rainbows onto the nearby leaves as the first rays of sunlight pierce them. Suddenly Levi wishes he were barefoot and could feel the coolness of the earth against the soles of his feet. He takes another deep breath and looks up at the pale blue sky that promises beautiful weather, just like Erwin predicted. The very idea of life seems to hang in the air, encased within the plants, the dawn, the hard-trampled dirt on which Levi is standing, wondering whether he has ever seen colours so vivid before.

He walks into the bathroom, glad to find the water in the heater still warm from the previous night as he fills the washbowl and starts cleaning himself, rinsing the lingering stench of sweat out of his armpits and neck and splashing water onto his face before drying himself and changing into clean clothes; a pair of brown slacks and a white cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. When he returns to the kitchen he finds Erwin pouring tea into two enamel mugs before clambering awkwardly down to the cellar to fetch the milk, hitting his head on his way back up. He splashes a drop into each cup and hands the other to Levi, rubbing at the sore spot on his forehead as he walks out to sit down on the stairs leading up to the door. Levi joins him quietly, blowing into his tea to cool it down, his eyes following two dragonflies as they whirr past and disappear into the orchard.

"Do you suppose it helps to be reminded of things like this?" Erwin asks suddenly, leaning his back against the railing and stretching out his long legs to fall on the lower steps.

"I suppose it doesn't hurt," Levi says with a shrug and takes a sip of his tea. "It's probably better than being fucking miserable all the time."

The man agrees in a quiet hum and waves a fly off his cup lazily. Levi watches him from the corner of his eye, taking in the sharp profile, the uncombed strands of hair falling across his forehead, the Roman nose above lips now drawn into a persistent smile. Like sensing his gaze, Erwin turns to look back at him, his brows suddenly furrowing slightly. He hesitates for a few seconds before speaking.

"I sincerely hope that you're not," he says and the intensity of his gaze forces Levi's eyes back on the tree line at the far edge of the garden. "I wish so much that all this has been an improvement rather than a burden."

"Of course it's been an improvement," Levi tells him almost impatiently. "Do you really think I'd be doing any of this if it wasn't?"

Erwin takes a moment to reply. "No, I guess not," he says, balancing the enamel mug on his knee and continuing more quietly, "I want you to know that if there ever comes a time when you'd prefer to end your involvement with-

"Not today," Levi interrupts him, not sure himself whether he means it as a reply or a request.

The man lets out a laugh. “As you wish,” he simply says and takes a large gulp of his tea.

They both turn to look out over the yard, drinking the tea without speaking, both comfortable with the lingering silence that seems to fit the calmness of the early hour. Levi can’t help feeling dazed by it all, the cottage, the garden, the stillness of the warm summer morning and the fact that people can live like this, have such things in their lives as this. In the drab little apartment he shared with Kenny, Levi never knew to dream of any such place; they didn’t even have houseplants let alone this abundance of life.

“It’s such a lovely place,” he says out loud, making Erwin turn to look at him as if surprised by the sudden affirmation.

“Yes,” he agrees and even from this one word Levi can tell he’s smiling again. “Very lovely. I feel I enjoy it even more now than I have in the past. Not that it’s surprising – I find good company can improve any place.”

“I guess it wasn’t a waste then,” Levi says, “bringing them along.”

“Not at all,” Erwin agrees again. “I think you’re right. We’d be doing ourselves a great disservice if we didn’t try and enjoy ourselves as much as we’re able. After all, none of us know how many days such as this we have left.”

Levi nods wordlessly, drinking his tea in which the milk tastes creamier than usual. As a ray of sun falls warmly on his face, Levi feels himself basking not only in that heat but also in this sensation of not having to be anyone or anything to anybody, and the absence of fear he has found in this place. He’s aware of Farlan and Isabel in their room upstairs but here he feels different, they feel separate and detached, like their lives are not his responsibility, if even for this one day. He glances up at Erwin again, returning his smile quickly before chuckling into his mug, remembering Erwin’s expression when he realised the mistake he made regarding Levi and Farlan’s relationship: eyes wide and cheeks flushed, gaze wandering between the two. Levi’s chuckle turns into a quiet laugh at the thought.

“What?” Erwin asks him, but he shakes his head, still smiling.

“Nothing,” he replies. “I just remembered something funny.”

He can hear quiet sounds drifting out through the open door behind him, soft footsteps on the stairs and pieces of a whispered conversation Farlan and Isabel are having on their way down. He turns to look back and sees them sneaking nearly soundlessly into the kitchen, like suddenly wary of the situation they have woken up to. Farlan is already dressed in plain slacks and a short-sleeved shirt, his hair struggling to hold the shape of the quiff that was pathetic to begin with; the result is a floppy mess which still manages to look neat when compared to Isabel’s red mop, more tangles than anything as it falls about her face. When Farlan’s eyes meet Levi’s he speeds past her to rush down the stairs like suddenly aware of his morning stiffness, which Levi makes a point not to look at as the man passes them, barely stopping to wish them good morning.

“Wait for me, Farlan!” Isabel shouts after him, running barefoot down the little path to the privy dressed in a long shirt that reaches down to the knees of her thin, wiry legs.

“I should get started on breakfast,” Erwin mutters, emptying his cup before pushing himself to his feet, gesturing for Levi to stay seated as he makes to join him. “Please. You’re my guest, remember?”

Levi lets it go and closes his eyes as he leans his back against the railing of the stairs, letting the sun beam down on his smiling face. The morning is growing rapidly warmer, reaching for the hot day it’s promising to become. By the time Farlan and Isabel join him, he feels drowsy and content, drinking the last of his tea in one big gulp as they sit down on the stairs beside him. He glances into the kitchen at Erwin who has busied himself with skillets and eggs; beyond the clangs and bangs Levi can hear him humming quietly to himself.

“Should we go help him?” Isabel asks in a whisper and Levi shakes his head.

“Just enjoy the sun,” he replies, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back again. He can feel the sleepless night weighing on his closed lids and he lets out a wide yawn.

“Didn’t sleep so well then?” Farlan inquires in a casual tone about which something still catches Levi’s attention. He shrugs dismissively.

“Well enough,” he says, preferring not to tell an outright lie. “What about you?”

“I slept so well, big brother!” Isabel exclaims excitedly.

“Yes, and you snored so well too,” Farlan teases her sullenly. “I’m practically deaf now thanks to you.”

Isabel makes a face at the man before shoving him hard and knocking him down a step; it takes a moment for Levi to realise the indignation on his face is faked and not real.

“For that,” the man says, pointing his index finger at the girl, “I’m brushing your hair tonight.”

“No!” Isabel shouts, covering her tangled mane with her hands.

“Yes!” Farlan shouts back, laughing. “Honestly, you’re impossible! Look at you! You look like some feral child. You’re not being raised by wolves you know.”

“No!” Isabel shouts again, jumping up and sprinting past them toward the well, sticking her head under the pump and wetting her hair before shaking out the water; the beads fall into the grass around her and dampen her shirt, creating little grey blotches in the white fabric. Levi watches her and laughs as she skips about the garden before running up the stairs again, yelping at the threshold to the kitchen as the momentum of her steps forces a splinter under the skin of her big toe.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Farlan says with a sigh as Isabel hobbles into the room and sits down at the table.

Levi smiles to himself as he pushes onto his feet and walks into the kitchen after Farlan, who has knelt in front of the girl and taken her foot in his lap. Erwin looks at them from the stove,

frowning and looking worried until he sees the situation isn't serious. He carefully moves four fried eggs onto plates before putting the skillet down.

"I think I saw some needles in here somewhere," he muses before starting to rummage through the cupboards, finally finding an old biscuit tin filled with sewing supplies.

He sterilises a needle and hands it to Farlan, who starts teasing the splinter out of Isabel's toe. Levi notes absently how still she sits, barely even grimacing despite the discomfort and pain she must be in. He takes a seat at the table as well, reaching across to take Isabel by the hand; she looks up at him, almost surprised it seems, before her mouth stretches into a wide smile and she squeezes his hand harder.

"It doesn't hurt that bad, big brother," she tells him, flinching as Farlan finally gets the splinter between his thumb and forefinger and pulls it out from under her skin; Erwin hands him a plaster, which he sticks around the girl's slim toe.

"There you go, you troublesome brat," Farlan tells her, smiling, "not that I expect you to thank me, you little savage."

For a second Isabel looks as though she is about to screw up her face, but instead she lets go of Levi's hand and stands up, wrapping her arms around Farlan's neck. The man stands stunned for a few seconds before returning the gesture, looking genuinely touched.

"Thank you, Farlan," Isabel whispers; Levi can see the man's eyes glistening.

"I didn't mean you need to do that," he mutters to her before letting go and clearing his throat awkwardly.

Levi meets Erwin's eyes as he carries the plates to the table and they both smile; he spots the faint lines in the corners of the man's eyes and his smile widens as he wonders how he has never noticed them before. They all take their seats to enjoy the breakfast Erwin has cooked: fried eggs with the yolks oozing out over toasted slices of bread, and more of the tea he brews so well.

"You're almost as good at making food as Farlan," Isabel tells Erwin after she's snatched the last piece of bread off Farlan's plate.

"I don't know about that," he replies with a laugh. "Frying eggs is close to the height of my abilities I'm afraid."

"So who cooked that lamb then?" Levi thinks to ask him suddenly. "When we first met."

Erwin looks at him for a few seconds and Levi can tell he is bringing that first encounter to mind from the way his gaze lacks focus, and he wonders whether he remembers it oddly fondly like Levi himself does or in some other way entirely.

"That is what we had, isn't it?" Erwin says, his expression still distracted. "It was given to me by a neighbour. She was worried I wasn't eating well."

“I bet she wasn’t wrong about that either,” Levi responds, clicking his tongue. “If you’re as shit at cooking as you are at cleaning I’m surprised you’ve not starved to death yet.”

“Now, now,” Erwin scolds him gently.

Across the table Farlan snorts loudly, masking it poorly with a cough when Levi glances at him, frowning. Farlan’s eyes evade his, focusing instead on his plate where the runny yolk has left smears of yellow on the white porcelain. There’s something strangely rigid about his posture, like he’s aware of Levi watching and is trying to stay still so as not to let his body betray whatever mood he is having.

“Will we go swimming today?” Isabel asks, breaking the tense silence.

“If you’d like,” Erwin replies turning to look at Levi again. “Maybe we could pack a lunch, have a picnic?”

Levi shrugs. “I don’t see why not.”

“Can we rent bicycles like you promised too, Erwin?” Isabel demands almost shrilly, her hands clutching her mug of tea tightly.

Erwin glances around the table at Farlan and Levi. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know how to ride one,” Levi admits casually, earning another sneer from Farlan.

“I guess you can add that to the list,” the man states mockingly without meeting anyone’s gaze.

A strained silence falls over the table and Levi can feel his brows furrowing somewhere beyond the confusion and hurt he feels; the latter seems almost petty after everything he has been through, and a part of him is surprised something so trivial can make him feel so bad. He looks at Farlan wordlessly; the man has folded his arms across his chest and is staring out into the garden almost sullenly and something about his pose reminds Levi of a child who refuses to do something after being told to. When Farlan finally mutters a quick and unrequested apology, Levi doesn’t know how to take it and merely shrugs.

“If that’s how you really see me why shouldn’t you say it out loud?” he tells the man in an emotionless tone that seems to put Farlan’s nose even further out of joint.

“You know it’s not how I see you, Levi,” he huffs irritably. “You know I didn’t mean it so why do you have to take it like that? It was only a joke for Christ’s sake.”

“Right,” Levi says quietly; from the corner of his eyes he can see Erwin casting a long look at Isabel.

“Look, I already apologised,” Farlan counters, raising his voice. “I don’t know what more you want me to do. Do you want me to take it back? Sure, I take it back. I wish I’d never said anything. Are you happy now?”

“Maybe you could sit on the luggage carrier?” Erwin cuts in before Levi can get a word out. “That way you wouldn’t have to ride the bicycle.”

“I don’t know how to ride one either,” Isabel tells them her voice so loud Levi feels she’s desperate to stop their argument. “Can I sit on the carrier too?”

“If we rented two, do you think you could ride the other one?” Erwin asks after turning to Farlan, who shrugs dismissively.

“Sure,” he sighs, as if the mere thought of riding one of them around is exhausting. “So long as I won’t have to ride very far.”

“Can we go right now?” Isabel asks and Levi hurries to shake his head.

“I have to do the dishes first,” he says, getting up from the table and starting to busy himself with drawing water out of the heater and pouring it into the sink.

Levi can hear the rest of them leaving the table as well and walking out into the garden where the sun has started to dry out the grass and fill the clearing with its luminous rays. Through the window he catches a glimpse of Isabel wandering among the tall grass, humming quietly to herself as she bends over to peer down at a bee buzzing wildly as it circles the cranesbills. The sound of a chair scraping against the wooden floor makes Levi turn around to see Erwin gathering up their plates from the table.

“You don’t have to do that,” Levi tells him as Erwin leans over to place the dishes in the warm water. “I’ll manage just fine by myself.”

“We’ll be done faster by the two of us,” he replies with a smile. “Do you want me to wash or dry?”

Levi hands the man a tattered tea towel. “As if I’d trust you to get these clean,” he mutters as Erwin moves to his right, chuckling quietly.

“Your lack of faith in my abilities is astounding,” the man protests gently, leaning on the counter as Levi starts scrubbing at the enamel mugs.

“I know what you’re like,” he counters with a shrug that makes Erwin scoff.

“You do?” he asks, and as Levi nods goes on, “I’ll have you know that before you came along I had gotten by perfectly adequately on my own for well over a decade.”

It’s Levi’s turn to scoff as he rinses the soap off the mugs before passing them to Erwin. “Perfectly adequately for someone who’s spent his whole life being waited on hand and foot maybe,” he states his opinion jokingly, “which means you eat out six times a week and sweep your floors once a month, if that, and you’ve no idea how to get stains off anything.”

“Was it true what you told Lilian?” Erwin asks now, wiping at the mugs. “Did your mother really teach you all of that?”

Levi shrugs. "If she did I don't remember it," he admits. "I can't remember a time when I've not done it."

Erwin nods along but seems to sense Levi's reluctance to get into the subject, and lets it go as they continue to do the dishes with one of those uncomplicated silences they often share falling between them. Soon Levi finds himself casting glances at Erwin from the corner of his eye, suddenly remembering him telling Farlan he swims regularly. Looking at the man's physique it's hardly a surprising piece of news, but Levi finds it strange nonetheless. For him there is something odd about picturing the rest of Erwin's life, the hours they don't spend together, him sitting in his office with his paperwork and going for a swim in one of those indoor swimming pools. When he realises Erwin has noticed his staring Levi turns quickly back toward the sink, finishing the rest of the dishes without so much as a look at the man.

"Can we go now?" Isabel asks pleadingly, having appeared behind them from the garden just as Erwin places the last of the plates onto a shelf.

Levi glances into the sitting room where Farlan has curled up in an armchair with a book; he feels the sleepless night pressing on his eyes and more than anything he wants to get off his aching feet. The warmth of the day wafting into the room makes him wish he could spread a blanket out amidst the cranesbills and nod off for a minute or two with the slanting rays of the sun as his blanket, waking up drowsy and content to the gentle tickle of a spider walking along his arm.

In his usual observant way, Erwin seems to pick up on Levi's tiredness. "I was hoping we could work in the garden a bit more today," he tells the girl. "Get some of those weeds out of the way."

Isabel seems to consider this for a moment before springing to life, marching out of the cottage with Erwin on her heels. Levi can hear them circling the cabin as he walks into the sitting room and throws himself down on the sofa, stretching out his legs and closing his eyes that have started to sting from the lack of sleep. In the armchair Farlan turns a page noisily, pretending to read for a few more minutes before giving up with a heavy sigh and laying his book on the armrest.

"Levi," he says quietly, making Levi look at him inquiringly. "I want you to know I really am sorry for what I said earlier. It was a rotten thing to let out of my mouth."

"I already told you it's fine," Levi tells him, wishing they could put the whole thing behind them already. "I shouldn't have dragged you along on this trip in the first place. No wonder you're upset with me."

"It's not that," Farlan counters, sounding almost desperate. "It's really not been as terrible as I thought it would be. I've really no problem with any of this."

"What is it then?" Levi asks him and frowns. "Clearly there's something I'm doing that's making you angry."

"I just wish you didn't keep lying to me all the time," Farlan explains, making Levi's frown deeper. In the back of his mind he wonders whether Farlan has somehow found out about the

mission – but how could he have?

“What have I been lying to you about?” he asks, perplexed but lying effortlessly. “As far as I know I’ve been nothing but honest with you.”

“Please, Levi,” the man says, rolling his eyes and straightening up in the chair. “I know about the two of you.”

Levi shakes his head slowly, struggling to understand, his mind still trying to work out how Farlan could’ve possibly figured out what Erwin really is. Had he seen the note Levi left him and Isabel? All he wrote was ‘stay here’ – how could that have revealed anything of substance to the man even if he had happened to see it?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replies, making Farlan’s expression grow surprisingly irritated.

“I told you, stop lying to me,” the man tells him sternly, lowering his voice as he hears Erwin and Isabel outside the window. “We’re supposed to trust each other, aren’t we? Do you have any idea how insulting it is when you keep things from me like this?”

“What am I keeping from you?” Levi insists. “I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about. How am I supposed to not insult you when I’ve no idea what you’re insulted by?”

“I know you’re sleeping with him, Levi,” Farlan finally whispers almost angrily, waving his hand and making the book fall onto the floor.

Levi frowns for a few more seconds before letting out a disbelieving chuckle. “You’re not serious,” he states plainly, looking at Farlan’s gloomy face. “What the fuck gave you that impression?”

“Oh, come on. It’s so obvious,” the man argues quietly. “Just the way you are around each other. How many times has it been now that I’ve asked you about that? And how many times have you lied to me and told me there’s nothing like that going on between you two?”

“I’ve not lied to you because there is nothing between us,” Levi tells him, annoyed by the man rolling his eyes as a response. “Just because you’d like to doesn’t mean we all do, you know.”

Farlan’s eyes flash almost manically as an ugly smile twists his lips. “Is that so?” he says slowly. “So I suppose you have a good explanation for the fact that when I came downstairs last night your bed was empty and neither one of you was anywhere to be seen.”

Levi’s next words get caught in his throat for a moment too long, just long enough for Farlan’s expression to turn victorious. “I couldn’t sleep,” he finally provides as an explanation he knows himself is feeble at best, and somewhere in the back of his mind he’s wondering why he has bothered to come up with even that much. “I went for a walk in the forest.”

“And left me and Isabel alone in the middle of nowhere with a complete stranger? I’m sure you did,” Farlan responds sardonically before picking up his book and flipping through it to find the right page. “I don’t even understand why you felt like you needed to lie about it, Levi. I told you before, why you do it is none of my business as long as you’re not doing it for my sake, or Isabel’s.”

“That’s not what it is,” Levi says, trying to think of a way out without telling the truth, disgusted by the comparison with Krieger that Farlan has drawn without realising it. “I didn’t lie about that, I really didn’t.”

Farlan lifts his gaze from the book and Levi is surprised to see his eyes are filled with pity. “I wonder if you know that it won’t end well,” he says, his voice suddenly breaking. “I know you think no one will find out, but please trust me when I tell you someone always does. And then it won’t matter how beautiful it was or how much you wanted it or how much you enjoyed it while you had it.”

Levi watches Farlan close the book around his finger, watches him get swiftly to his feet, watches him run up the stairs and disappear into the bedroom. Levi breaks the silence the man has left behind by swearing quietly to himself as he slides down on the sofa to stare at the timbers criss-crossing over the ceiling and he can’t help but think how Farlan can’t be blamed for thinking what he does. Levi doesn’t see the sense in denying how Erwin treats him even if that strange affection has nothing to do with what Farlan’s imagining. An image of Erwin naked by the banks of the river creeps up to Levi, burning its way onto his cheeks as he closes his eyes again, trying not to think about how right Farlan could be if the world were a different kind of place.

Levi isn’t sure how to make peace with it, having Farlan assume what he does, but it doesn’t seem like he has been given a choice in the matter; he knows that hasty half-truth he let slip wouldn’t have convinced him either. As for coming up with a better explanation, Levi is doubtful whether anything short of the truth would convince the man at this point; anything else would just seem like a desperate attempt to cover his tracks. Levi sighs heavily, wondering to himself whether he really does mind Farlan thinking what he does. After all, there are worse things he could be assuming, and compared to the truth this seems to Levi relatively harmless until he remembers Farlan’s parting words. Given the man’s history, it’s really no wonder he would fear for Levi over something like this.

He rolls onto his side and stares at the empty fireplace, focusing for a few minutes on Erwin and Isabel’s muffled conversation until his eyes close and he drifts off, waking only when they return indoors, stomping their dirt-ridden shoes against the floor by the door not to carry in more filth than is necessary. Levi sits up, yawning widely and wondering how much time has passed.

“Should we get going?” Erwin asks him and he nods to Isabel’s ultimate delight.

He walks into the kitchen and packs them a modest lunch, some sandwiches and fresh peaches, a bottle of water and another of wine. When he returns to the sitting room he finds them all waiting, even Farlan, who seems to be in a better mood, smoking by the entrance to the cottage with an oddly serene expression. When Isabel runs over and grabs his arm to drag

him to the car he even laughs and lets her, putting out his cigarette and getting in, rolling down the window to let Isabel stick her head out.

“Hurry up already!” she exclaims before disappearing, making Erwin laugh as he locks the door.

“Best do as she says,” he tells Levi kindly, raising his hands defensively as he starts walking toward the car.

Levi keeps his eyes on Erwin as he follows, wondering at how much he’s seen the man change from that night when his life took that fateful turn. For so long afterwards there was always something so serious about him, so many things like this that seemed hidden and reserved for something else. Only now as he gets in the car does Levi think to wonder whether it was just his own inability or reluctance to see that about the man, feeling more comfortable reducing him to something less than fully human. He looks over at Erwin whose face is relaxed in a smile as he starts the engine, and it seems strange to him that he could miss this before, all this life within the man, all this fullness of his personality. He thinks back to his frantic search in Erwin’s apartment for things that would tell him who the man really was and it seems so silly to him now, to have gone through kitchen cupboards to look for something that was right in front of him all along. Levi turns to look at the road almost reluctantly, sensing rather than seeing Farlan’s gaze lingering on his face.

They drive to the edge of a little nearby town and Erwin leaves the car by a small guesthouse built from large red bricks; Levi can see a short row of bicycles by the entrance. He joins Isabel and Farlan in examining them while Erwin walks inside the building, returning five minutes later with the owner, a stocky, middle-aged man with a large greying moustache and a concerned expression.

“Just the girl and the dark haired man,” Erwin seems to continue a previous discussion. “I’d be surprised if either of them weighs more than fifty kilos.”

The owner hesitates for another few seconds before letting out a resigned sigh and nodding. “Fine,” he says. “They can ride on the luggage carriers on your word that you’ll repay me for any possible damages.”

“Of course,” Erwin says and extends his hand, which the other man shakes, still looking as concerned as ever. “Do you know of any place that’d be good for swimming near here?”

The owner excuses himself for a few seconds and returns with a map, which he shows to Erwin, pointing his finger on it. “You should go along the main road and turn right here – it’s a small path, almost overgrown so you have to keep your eyes open or you’ll miss it – and ride along it for a few kilometres and you’ll see a spot where the riverbank isn’t as steep and overgrown. There should be a couple of row boats tied up there, so you’ll recognise it when you get to it.”

Erwin peers at the map for another few seconds before thanking the man, who walks over to unlock two of the bicycles and hands them over to Erwin and Farlan.

“I want to ride with Erwin!” Isabel shouts excitedly, hopping up to sit on the luggage carrier before Erwin has even put one of his large feet on the pedals.

“There might be some traffic on the road,” the owner of the guesthouse warns them. “A train got derailed not far from here early this morning. They’re bringing in people to help clear it up.”

“Really?” Erwin asks, fighting to balance the bicycle with Isabel on board. “An army train?”

“Yes,” the man tells him, scratching the bald spot on his head. “They don’t know the cause of it yet but still, it’s a blow.”

Erwin nods thoughtfully. “Were there any casualties?”

“Some, unfortunately,” the man explains. “Apparently it was a supply train, though, so not as many as could’ve been.”

“How terrible,” Farlan mutters and they all agree quietly, including the owner who returns indoors after wishing them a good day while Levi fights to keep his eyes away from Erwin.

“Should we get going then?” Erwin asks them and Isabel repeats her reply enthusiastically four times, shifting her weight on the luggage carrier and gripping it with her hands like expecting Erwin to pedal her at a speed that requires such measures.

Levi looks over at Farlan, expecting a weary sigh but being pleasantly surprised when the man nods and smiles. “Come on then,” he says, throwing his leg over the saddle.

Levi walks forward, his hands clutching the brown paper bag that contains their lunch, and sits down on the carrier, which feels even less comfortable than he imagined. He props the bag between his legs and wraps his fingers around the thin metal wiring of the make-shift seat before trying to lift his feet onto the bolts sticking out from the middle of the wheels; they slip off instantly and he’s forced to flex his muscles to keep them from brushing against the ground instead.

“You ready?” Farlan asks him, turning back to catch his nod.

Erwin and Isabel have already circled the yard of the guesthouse by the time Farlan manages to get enough speed to keep the bicycle in balance. He follows Erwin out onto the main road, struggling a little at the rise but pedalling more easily thereafter. It takes Levi until the turn they make to the little forest path to realise how tightly he is gripping the carrier and he eases his hold, gritting his teeth as they speed down a gentle slope; it seems to him they’re hitting every rock and bump on the way. They catch up to Erwin and Isabel, who seems to be enjoying the ride much more than Levi.

By the time they get to a short stretch of the river with two old row boats drawn up onto the gentle slope of the bank, Levi’s legs and back are aching and he can no longer tell whether the overwhelming stench of sweat is coming from himself or Farlan, whose shirt has a large wet stain over most of his back. The sun is beaming down from a cloudless sky, there’s not a breath of wind stirring the tall grass full of the noisy stridulation of grasshoppers and when

they finally dismount their bicycles the first thing all of them seem to want is a few large gulps of water. Levi takes the last sip as Erwin pulls a quilt out of his backpack and spreads it on the ground in the shade of a large beech tree before sitting down and letting out an exasperated sigh. They join him swiftly, all but Isabel who has already run down to the edge of the water to peer through the fluctuating surface, leaning onto one of the boats.

“There are little fish in here!” she tells them in an excited shout that makes Levi smile as he sits down next to Erwin who has fallen on his back with his arms folded under his head.

“Do you have a smoke?” Farlan asks familiarly, accepting the cigarette case Erwin hands him and lighting one.

“Light one for me too, won’t you?” Erwin asks, closing his eyes and yawning as Farlan hands him a smoke and holds a lit match at the tip.

Levi looks at them and sneers. “Fucking vile, the both of you,” he tells them as the stench starts wafting into his nose. “I always knew you were beyond help Erwin, but did you have to take Farlan down with you?”

“Please,” Farlan says and scoffs. “When I was younger I used to smoke like a chimney. Used to go through a pack a day when essays were due.”

“Doing what I do you can’t really help it,” Erwin says almost defensively, looking at his cigarette pensively before taking a long drag.

“What fucking strong characters the both of you have,” Levi tells them jokingly.

“Well, not everyone can be you,” Farlan tells him and smiles playfully. “If we could the world would no doubt be a better place.”

“And certainly much cleaner,” Erwin adds as Isabel runs over to them and sits down, leaning closer to the man and whispering something in his ear. “Of course,” he tells her gently, sitting up and rummaging through the backpack for a few seconds before pulling out a bundle of dark green fabric, which he hands to the girl. She gets up again and walks out of sight behind the trees, returning a moment later wearing a dark green t-shirt, her bare legs poking out the hem that reaches well below her hips.

“What in God’s name is that?” Farlan asks her, the laughter in his voice making her frown.

“Shut up, Farlan!” she snaps. “I didn’t have anything to wear so I’m borrowing this and you can keep your nose out of it.”

“Goodness, I’m sorry,” he tells her, raising his hands defensively. “I swear I’ll not say another word.”

“You’d better not,” she says, marching to join them on the quilt, “or I’ll sew your mouth shut in your sleep, you piss-brained ass.”

“And there’s the little savage,” Farlan exclaims, pinching the girl’s ear. “Who taught you to say things like that? I know I didn’t.”

They all turn to look at Levi who frowns. "I don't say things like that," he argues, though no one seems convinced.

"You just swore a few minutes ago," Erwin reminds him quietly. "Twice."

"Well I didn't fucking call you a piss-brained ass, did I?" he counters, making the rest of them laugh.

"Can we go swimming now Erwin?" Isabel asks the man as soon as she's finished chuckling.

"Yes, I believe we can," Erwin tells the girl, who jumps up excitedly and runs down to the edge of the water again. The man puts out his cigarette and looks around himself as his hands go through the contents of the backpack. "I just need to find a place to change..."

"I'm sure Levi won't mind holding up a towel for you," Farlan voices gleefully, biting into a peach he's grabbed from the paper bag, the chewing masking the mischievous smirk on his face.

Erwin meets Levi's eyes for a moment that forces heat onto Levi's cheeks when he remembers the previous night and realises there is little need for modesty between them now, and that all things considered Farlan's suggestion isn't as ridiculous as it sounds. The other man seems to have realised this as well, falling speechless for long enough to make Farlan clear his throat audibly.

"I think I'll manage," Erwin finally utters before pushing to his feet and walking behind the trees.

Levi turns his eyes on the patterns of the quilt to keep himself from seeing the flashes of naked flesh not hidden by the insufficient cover of the foliage. He can hear Farlan sucking the juice of the peach into his mouth noisily and something about it sounds indecent. He shoots a glare at the man, who gives him a dismissive half-shrug.

"What?" he asks innocently and Levi shakes his head.

"You should stop that," he tells the man in a mumble.

"Stop what?" Farlan inquires now, making Levi look up angrily.

"Don't," he barely says, making Farlan chuckle again as he bites into the fruit, spreading sticky syrup on his chin and wiping it off carelessly with the back of his hand.

"Stop being so serious," the man scolds him, falling suddenly silent with the peach forgotten in mid-air halfway to his mouth.

Farlan's eyes fix on something behind Levi, who turns to see Erwin walking toward them; the man is wearing nothing but swimming trunks and Levi's gaze falls lingeringly over his muscular thighs before turning quickly away. Here in the light of day Erwin's scant clothing seems to him more improper than his nakedness did in the early hours before dawn and Levi is glad when the man drops the bundle of his clothes on the quilt and starts walking toward

the river. He can see Farlan stealing glances at the man's back in between nibbles of his peach.

"Can you throw me in the water?" Isabel's voice comes to him over the splashing of the stream as the two walk into the river behind him.

"We'll have to check the bottom for rocks first," Levi hears Erwin tell her in response.

Levi reaches into the paper bag and starts eating, taking off half the flesh of a peach in one large bite. He can sense Farlan examining his every move but doesn't say anything despite the irritation it causes in him. When the man starts sucking on the pit of his fruit noisily, Levi almost wishes he'd accidentally choke on it.

"You know, I had a bit of a think when I was up in the bedroom," Farlan tells him without encouragement, lying down on the quilt and taking a deep breath, "and I really can't blame you."

"For what?" Levi asks sourly.

"For what you're up to with him," the man explains almost lazily. "I mean, we'll all be dead soon anyway. You might as well enjoy what time you have left."

Levi turns to look at Farlan, who's staring up into the cloudless blue of the sky with an expression on his face of carefree detachment that's bordering on blissful. It makes Levi remember his mother, painfully and unexpectedly – those memories are so rare these days. She looked like that for the last days, eyes on the ceiling and beyond, like some part of her had already left. Now Levi can see that she was free then of the fear of what was coming next, but as a child it was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen.

"I'm sorry," Farlan says languidly, but something about his frown tells Levi he means it. "Was that too morbid again?"

Levi sighs and lies down next to him, folding one of his arms under his head and casting his eyes up, squinting at the brightness. "Well, you can't really help yourself, can you?" he says tiredly, making Farlan chuckle.

"Did I ever tell you about my favourite book?" he asks Levi, who shakes his head. "The Iliad. Do you know it?"

"One of those Greek things?" Levi half guesses, frowning though Farlan confirms it. "Not really."

"It's about the Trojan war," Farlan tells him, reaching over to Erwin's cigarette case and lighting another one, "and about Achilles, the greatest of the Greeks, a hero with unprecedented skill in battle. His mother is a sea nymph so he's half a god and therefore no mortal can match him. The story starts with him arguing with Agamemnon, the king of Mycenae, who has stolen one of Achilles' war prizes, a woman called Briseis."

“Uh-huh,” Levi voices, closing his eyes. “Let me guess. At the end of the book he gets the girl and everyone lives happily ever after.”

Farlan laughs. “Not quite,” he says, taking a deep drag off his smoke. “First Achilles loses his most beloved companion Patroclus, who is killed by Hector in combat. Then Achilles avenges his death but ends up desecrating Hector’s body for eleven days, thus losing his honour. Before the war ends Achilles himself dies as well.”

“Sounds just like something you’d enjoy,” Levi tells Farlan flatly. “Fucking cheerful from start to finish.”

“I used to read it with Christofer,” the man says, falling quiet as he leans on his arm, looking over to Erwin and Isabel splashing around noisily in the water. “It’s clear he really cares about you.”

Levi doesn’t speak but turns on his side to watch the two figures in the river. Erwin has scooped Isabel on his arms to send her flying through the air, all laughter and screams before she disappears under the surface just to swim over to him to demand he do it again. Levi hasn’t wondered about Erwin’s past in a while but as he watches him wiping the water off his laughing face, he remembers all those moments when he’s questioned the man having lived alone in the past. Maybe there is someone out there missing him, people he is desperate to get back to, a wife and children who can barely remember now what he looks like. Maybe he wishes more than anything he were doing this with them instead.

“I don’t know about you,” Farlan says, starting to untie the laces of his shoes and roll up his pant legs, the cigarette dangling from his mouth, “but I want to cool my feet a little bit.”

After Farlan gets up and walks barefoot across the grass, Levi lies down again and closes his eyes, listening half-heartedly to the sounds of his friends, Farlan’s angry shouts as Isabel splashes water on him, the girl’s laughter, the slow steady hum of the grasshoppers. The air around him is perfectly warm, almost womb-like in its omnipresence. Levi can smell the grass, the trees, the richness of life everywhere around him and he thinks this is how it’s supposed to be, how he wishes it could be for so much longer. He can feel his own hand light and soothing on his chest rising and falling with every breath he takes, and without thinking about it further he lets the peacefulness lull him to a light sleep from which Erwin wakes him some minutes later, pulling a towel out of his backpack to dry himself.

“I’m sorry,” he says, looking down at Levi stretching his arms and yawning. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I wasn’t asleep,” Levi tells him, though he is not sure why.

The man takes a seat next to him and pulls a sandwich out of the brown paper bag, biting into it hungrily as Levi takes a swig of the wine; it tastes sour with the sweetness of the peach still lingering on his tongue. They look over at Farlan and Isabel who are peering down through the surface, most likely at the curious little fish that have gathered in the shallow waters to feed on the minerals their stomping has brought to the surface. Isabel is sitting on a flat rock by the shore, her feet in the river while Farlan stands over her and stares at their feet.

“Oh no, Farlan, it tickles!” she exclaims and laughs as the little fish start nibbling on her feet, and Farlan laughs as well.

Levi feels his heart grow light and heavy all at once, filling with joy for this moment on one hand and dread for its inevitable end on the other. He fights against the thought of Dresden, which even without Krieger brings him no comfort. Wondering almost dejectedly whether any of them will ever be able to live like this, free and as themselves without constant fear, he looks over at Erwin who smiles back at him, his mouth full of bread, before pulling his flask out of the backpack and handing it to Levi, who takes a large gulp and grimaces.

“Thank you,” Levi says before turning back toward the river. “For this I mean. I could never have given them this.”

“It’s my pleasure,” Erwin tells him gently. “It really is. I can’t remember the last time I’ve enjoyed myself so much.”

“Not even with Lilian?”

The words are out of his mouth before Levi can stop them and for the length of the silence that follows he thinks Erwin has taken offence. In the end he sighs and says, “No. Not even with Lilian.”

“I really thought that would’ve beaten this,” Levi mutters, making Erwin clear his throat.

“Well,” he whispers, “I never said it was unpleasant.”

Levi laughs quietly before taking another gulp out of the flask and passing it to Erwin. “Better at least than that time with—”

“Yes. Certainly better than that,” Erwin interrupts him emphatically, drinking the wine eagerly before handing it back to Levi. He hesitates for a good ten seconds before asking, “And what about you?”

Levi laughs again, bitterly this time. “Nothing pleasant about it for me,” he says, the words falling carelessly out of his mouth. “Not lately anyway.”

Erwin nods slowly and even without seeing him Levi can sense the question behind the intensity of his gaze. In the end he leaves it unasked, for which Levi is grateful, perhaps thinking it best not to bring up anything so unpleasant at this of all times. They fall silent watching Isabel and Farlan and drinking the wine and whatever is in that flask until the two join them on the quilt, leaving wet patches on the wool where they sit. Isabel falls quickly into an enthusiastic explanation about the fish, while Farlan focuses on his share of the wine and liquor, drinking keenly like only someone who’s not had a drop in years can.

“Whereabouts in Austria are you from?” Farlan asks Erwin suddenly in between thirsty gulps.

“Vienna,” the man replies as Levi hands Isabel a sandwich. “Have you ever been?”

Farlan shakes his head. “I’ve only been to Paris,” he explains. “What’s it like in Vienna?”

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Erwin says, smiling. “Wonderful old buildings, art galleries, museums. For you I’d especially recommend the Kunsthistorisches Museum. I’m sure you’d enjoy it.”

“I did always want to go there,” Farlan replies, accepting the sandwich Levi offers him and taking a bite, continuing with his mouth full, “but it was never my first choice. I was actually saving money to go to Greece before... Well, all this.”

“How come Greece?”

Farlan swallows arduously. “To map out the places of the Homeric epics,” he explains. “Christofer and I were obsessed about it. I remember we talked about it constantly. I actually could have afforded the trip by myself but I knew I couldn’t go without him so I kept adding to my savings.”

“Christofer?” Erwin asks and Levi casts a wary glance at Farlan, sensing Isabel straightening her posture next to him.

Farlan stays silent for a few seconds, turning the sandwich in his hand before taking another large gulp of the liquor. “Christofer was...” he starts, stopping to clear his throat. “Christofer is a friend of mine, though we’ve not been in touch since before I left Berlin. He was one of the first people to enlist so I suppose he left soon after I did.”

Erwin nods wordlessly, observant enough not to ask any further questions. “Let’s hope he’s had some good luck out there,” he barely says, making Farlan wave his hand in that oddly effeminate way.

“Oh, I’m sure he’s fine,” the man says. “He was always a soldier, even when we were younger. If anyone’s managed well out there it’s him.”

Erwin nods again and doesn’t correct Farlan, though it’s clear to Levi he knows that in war no one gets by on skill alone. Farlan continues to eat his sandwich somewhat less enthusiastically than before, giving Levi the impression that the subject has made him lose his appetite. The uncomfortable silence lasts for another dozen seconds until Isabel breaks it.

“Can we go swimming again, Erwin?” she asks the man, who smiles and sighs tiredly.

“Sure,” he says nonetheless. “Just let me rest for a minute longer, alright?”

Isabel nods and smiles as well. “Alright,” she agrees, throwing herself on her back on the quilt next to Levi on a patch of sun. “Back home we used to lie in the grass like this and look at clouds,” she tells them happily. “You’d see shapes in them sometimes, like horses or dogs or something like that.”

“I used to do that too when I was young,” Erwin tells her lying down on his back as well, his cheeks flushed in a way that makes Levi wonder whether he’s drunk. “There was a garden behind our house and on days like this I’d go outside to read and whenever I’d get sick of reading I would stare at the clouds.”

“What did you read?” Farlan asks, joining the two, leaving Levi the only person still sitting.

“This and that,” Erwin replies languidly. “Kipling, Burroughs, Jules Verne.”

“I used to love those books,” Farlan tells him almost dreamily. “After I read *Around the World in Eighty Days* all I wanted to do was to move to England and become a gentleman of leisure.”

Erwin laughs loudly. “No doubt you would have been very good at it, too,” he replies.

“I know,” Farlan agrees. “I was devastated when my parents told me we didn’t have *that* kind of money.”

“Perhaps you will some day,” Erwin tells him. “You could always marry rich.”

Farlan bursts out laughing, nearly choking on the wine he’s been drinking. “I think if I did it now, I’d keep the name Friedrich,” he says when he can finally speak again. “It’s what I call myself nowadays,” he explains as Erwin frowns.

“A secret identity,” the man muses. “No doubt it will add a certain *je ne sais quoi* to your already enchanting personality.”

“If that won’t win over someone rich and powerful, I don’t know what will,” Farlan says and laughs again. “It’s embarrassing, but sometimes I still dream about it. I always knew I was made for an easy life.”

Levi scoffs. “What kind of a person wants to sit on their arse all day doing nothing?” he asks the rest of them. “Back where I come from we used to spit after talking about people like you just to make sure we didn’t catch any of your fucking laziness.”

Erwin and Farlan look at each other and laugh. “Didn’t I tell you he’s just like that?” Farlan asks the man, who nods.

“He really is, isn’t he?” he replies, raising the nearly empty bottle of wine. “A toast to a true working class hero!”

“Hear, hear!” Farlan exclaims and they both drink eagerly before falling down on the quilt, laughing like idiots.

“What the fuck?” Levi mutters, looking at the two of them without being able to help sneering in disbelief.

“You’re all crazy,” Isabel mumbles from her sliver of sun drowsily, closing her eyes. “This is why we never liked city people. You always make things so complicated.”

“Teach us then,” Farlan tells her, drinking the last of the wine. “Teach us the life philosophy of your people.”

Isabel frowns in irritation before stating simply, “You’ve got your horses and you’ve got your wagon. All the rest is trimmings.”

“A wagon, eh?” Erwin asks her pensively. “Is that how you got around then?”

Isabel nods. “Just a wagon and horses and some fresh air,” she repeats. “There’s nothing else you need.”

Levi sees Erwin looking at her affectionately but with something akin to pity in his eyes. “That doesn’t sound bad at all,” he says quietly before lying back down and they all fall quiet for a long while before Farlan starts to chuckle.

“What?” Levi asks him, and the man’s chuckling turns into breathless laughter.

“Working class hero,” he manages, making Erwin laugh as well while Levi rolls his eyes.

“You’re both fucking idiots,” Levi tells them as they wipe tears out of their eyes.

“I’m sure you’re right about that,” Erwin tells him, turning again to Isabel, “but if we’re going to swim some more we’d better do it now.” They both clamber to their feet and Isabel runs into the water while Erwin stays behind, looking down at Levi. “Don’t you want to swim?” he asks and Levi shakes his head.

“Not naked I don’t,” he replies, making sure not to look at Farlan despite the chuckle the man lets out.

“In your underwear then,” Erwin says and there’s something about his smile that makes Levi nervous. “Even so you’ll probably be wearing more clothes than I am right now.”

Farlan utters another laugh behind him as Levi hesitates for a moment before untying the laces on his shoes, his fingers barely keeping their hold on the strings. He gets on his feet and undresses quickly, following Erwin to the edge of the water, feeling uncomfortably exposed in his tight underclothes even though Erwin has barely glanced at him since he undressed. He watches the man walk into the river and dive, swimming quickly to where Isabel is waiting. Levi dips one foot in the water; it feels much warmer now than it did in the early morning and he walks further, finally dipping his head under the surface to feel the blissful coolness on the scorched skin of his neck. He swims over to Erwin and Isabel, reaching his feet to touch the muddy bottom, the water coming up to his neck when on Erwin it barely reaches his muscular chest.

“Isn’t it so nice, big brother?” Isabel asks him, floating on her back and lifting her legs out of the water one by one.

Levi agrees quietly, trying to ignore the squelching feeling of the sludge pushing between his toes. “Could do with a little less muck,” he says, lifting his feet and starting to swim around.

“Can you throw me again, Erwin?” Isabel asks the man, who smiles.

“Oh, can I?” he asks back, grabbing the shrieking girl by the waist and hoisting her up on his arms before spinning her around slowly and letting go; Isabel lands a metre away with a splash that makes Levi close his eyes and wipe the water off his face. The girl emerges a few seconds later, giggling madly.

“Again!” she exclaims, making Erwin laugh before repeating the whole process to Isabel’s ultimate delight.

“Would you like to try?” Erwin asks Levi as he swims closer slowly; the shade of amusement on his face makes Levi wary.

“No,” he tells the man, who looks at him, raising his bushy eyebrows.

“No?” he asks back with a smile that makes Levi stop a few metres from him.

“I know what you’re planning,” Levi says, raising a look of pure innocence on Erwin’s features, “and I’m telling you to stop planning it.”

“What, me?” Erwin says, taking a step closer to him. “When have I ever planned anything?”

“I’m serious,” Levi tells him, not being able to keep the smile off his face. “Don’t you dare—”

Before he’s finished the sentence Erwin has plunged forward and secured a hold on Levi, pulling him closer and out of the water; Levi can feel the strength of his arms for a second before their support on his body disappears and he falls, the summer air cold on his skin for an instant until the river engulfs him, making him suddenly weightless after the stony heaviness of a mere moment before. He kicks his way to the surface, gasping for air and going for Erwin who swims away, staying effortlessly out of his reach.

“Wasn’t it fun, big brother?” Isabel asks him breathlessly just as Levi splashes water in Erwin’s direction.

“Not a fucking bit,” he states, making Erwin laugh loudly. “Yeah, you better stay out there.”

“Or what?” the man asks him, amused. “Are you going to throw me?”

Levi grits his teeth not to laugh. “I’ll fucking drown you, you little shit,” he tells the man, starting to swim towards him, never getting close despite the large, lazy strokes of Erwin’s arms. It’s only when he’s given up the chase, floating serenely on his back, that the man dives closer.

“I hope you’re not really upset,” he says, making Levi scoff.

“Of course not,” he tells the man quietly, keeping an eye on Isabel as she tries to catch the little fish with her bare hands by the riverbank. “I almost wish we didn’t have to go.”

“We could come back tomorrow,” Erwin suggests, “before we head back to the city.”

Levi grunts, closing his eyes for a second before straightening out his body and sticking his feet into the ankle-deep mud and walking back to the shore. As soon as he’s out of the water he can feel his wet underwear clinging to his body and he wastes no time in grabbing his clothes and marching behind the trees to change, pulling his trousers on his bare skin before yanking on his shirt and wringing the water out of the underclothes. Walking back to the quilt he runs into Erwin who smiles at him before disappearing behind the trees.

“Had fun?” Farlan asks him and something about his tone of voice makes Levi throw his wet underwear on his face. The man sits up, surprised and gasping.

“I told you to stop that, didn’t I?” Levi replies, sitting down heavily and drinking the last of the water that feels warm on his river-cooled lips.

Farlan throws the wet bundle of cloth at Levi’s back, making him laugh. “Maybe you should stop reading into my questions,” Farlan suggests.

“Maybe you should stop reading into everything,” Levi tells him immaturely before they both fall quiet.

After Isabel and Erwin finish changing they gather their things, Levi folding the quilt between himself and the luggage carrier for the ride back. By the time they reach the guest house they all wish they could go for a swim again, a sentiment that only magnifies in the stifling heat of the car, which eases but a little when they roll down their windows.

They do nothing until dinner, each lying down on whichever surface seems to suit them; Farlan on an armchair, legs thrown over the armrest, Isabel on the rug in front of the fireplace and Erwin on the sofa, one leg dangling over the side and the other bent at the knee. Levi sits in the other armchair and leans his cheek on his hand, yawning every five minutes. None of them feel like cooking and in the end they barely manage to agree on tasks to get dinner done.

Before the sun sets they carry their chairs out into the orchard, enjoying the cooling evening and following the dragonflies lazily with their eyes as they buzz slowly around the apple trees. Erwin and Farlan smoke their cigarettes quietly while Isabel fetches her collection of U-Boats, showing the clippings to Erwin who seems surprised and interested.

“This is a Type VIIC,” she explains, pointing at a picture of a submarine, her tone oddly serious. “It has the same amount of torpedoes as the Type VIIB, but it also has sonar. It’s a bit bigger as well, but otherwise they’re not that different from each other.”

“I see,” Erwin voices quietly. “How come you know so much about them?”

“A friend of mine told me,” she says as if in passing, moving on to the next clipping.

Levi and Farlan share a look but don’t speak even when Erwin continues, “And your friend, how did he know so much?”

“His brother was on a U-Boat,” Isabel explains, making Levi turn around. “He said that’s what he wanted to do, but they sent him on a ship instead. He still knew a lot about U-Boats, because it was his dream.”

“Where did you meet him?” Levi asks her now, but she falls silent, flipping through the pictures with a distant look on her face.

“Don’t bother,” Farlan tells Erwin quietly as he’s about to open his mouth. “You won’t get anything more out of her about it tonight.”

The man seems to believe Farlan and whatever he’s been about to say he lets go, turning instead back to the newspaper clippings. “Now what’s this one called?”

“That’s the U-38,” she tells him as if Levi’s question was never asked. “It’s a Type IXA.”

They go through the rest of her collection before she wishes them goodnight, being joined by Farlan as she climbs upstairs to the bedroom, and Levi suspects it has less to do with the man being tired and more to do with him wanting to keep her company. After they leave, a silence falls over the garden, broken only by the distant call of a cuckoo until Erwin clears his throat.

“I suppose I shouldn’t bring this up,” the man starts, making Levi turn his eyes on him, “but I wanted to apologise for what happened last night. I got the sense that my lack of composure made you feel uncomfortable.”

Levi turns his eyes on the wet grass at his feet, staying quiet for a long time. “I can’t really say whether it did or didn’t,” he finally mutters. “I’m not so sure of that myself.”

“I see,” Erwin whispers. “I wouldn’t want it to affect how you feel about our arrangement.”

“It won’t,” Levi tells him quickly, feeling certain about it. “It hasn’t. I’m not so bothered by it.”

“Good,” the man says, flashing Levi a quick smile. “It’s just that I’ve not seen—”

“You don’t have to explain,” Levi interrupts him though he can’t help wondering how that sentence would have ended. “It happens. We don’t need to talk about it.”

“As you wish,” Erwin says.

Despite his words Levi is still turning it over in his mind, the whys of it all. He remembers the fragment of the letter he found, remembers Erwin’s confessions of loneliness, but to him it seems like a poor explanation; after all, how lonely could he feel after spending the night with Lilian not two days ago? He casts a glance at the man’s face that is contemplative in the silence that has fallen between them again.

“How long have you lived in Germany?” Levi asks in a whisper to break it, Erwin’s frown making him fear for a second that he’ll refuse to answer again.

“A little over ten years now,” the man replies equally quietly, his expression shifting between tiredness and concern. “Lately I’ve felt...”

“What?” Levi asks as Erwin’s words trail off and he shakes his head.

“I don’t know,” he mutters and sighs. “I suppose I’m afraid I’ll forget it all. Some days it can be so hard to remember.”

Levi thinks about these words and thinks he understands. It's not been half so long since he left Berlin, the only place he has ever thought of as home, and already the details are starting to blur in his mind: the colour of the walls of their little shop, the view from his bedroom window, how many cupboards they had in their kitchen.

"Sometimes I think about all the things I've given up," Erwin tells him quietly, his voice full of a sudden sadness, "and looking at what I've achieved I can't tell if it's been worth it."

Levi doesn't know what to say and so he simply nods, looking at the exhaustion and sorrow on Erwin's face and feeling an odd tightness in his chest. He wishes he had some words of comfort, something he could say, some kind of certainty he could loan the man, but his mind comes up with nothing.

"I suppose I'll need to see this through to know for sure," the man says and sighs. "I'm certain the waiting is worse for you though."

Levi shrugs. "Sometimes it doesn't feel like it," he states. "I can't really remember much about the time before all this. It's easier to cope with something when it's all you've ever known. I guess that's why Farlan's having such a difficult time with it."

"What was it like?" Erwin asks him now. "Your life in Berlin?"

Levi sighs, pressing his hands against his eyes for a few seconds. "It always seemed I didn't belong there," he explains, wondering himself why he's talking so much. "It didn't seem like I could belong anywhere. Before they told me I was a Jew I barely knew what it meant. All those things they say about community and religion and all that have never made sense to me. I never had any of that. I remember how fucking unfair it all felt, all of it just because my mother was Jewish. She'd been dead for years by then, I could barely remember what she looked like. I'd never even met my grandparents and all of a sudden they became the people who determined the rest of my life for me."

He looks at Erwin, fearing the pity he's expecting to see but finding sympathy instead. "How old were you when your mother died?"

"I'm not sure," Levi admits. "My uncle and I didn't talk about it much afterwards. I know I didn't start school until he came along, so I can't have been very old."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the man tells him gently. "I know what it's like to lose a parent. It's a very unique kind of pain."

Levi sighs. "You'd think it wouldn't matter," he mutters. "Like I said, I can barely remember her now."

"I believe there are many things we can't remember," Erwin says, "which continue to be important for the whole of our lives. She was the first person to ever hold you – how could that not have meaning?"

"More like the only person," Levi whispers, uttering a bitter laugh. "Before Farlan came along at least."

“I’m glad you’ve found someone now who can do that,” Erwin tells him, his eyes on the lavender hues of the sky. “It’s not good to be lonely for too long.”

“Like you have been?” Levi asks before he can stop himself, making the man turn to him with a puzzled expression.

“Yes,” Erwin finally replies. “Like I was before.”

When Levi finally crawls into the little maid’s bed in the kitchen, he feels the length of the day as a soreness that seems to linger in every muscle of his body that still manages to do nothing to stop him falling asleep as soon as his head hits the pillow. He sleeps so soundly that come morning it takes him nearly a minute to regain his sense of time and place. The darkness of the cottage is full of the faint sound of Erwin’s snoring that carries all the way to the kitchen. When Levi pulls his shoes on and steps outside, he finds a vaporous mist hanging above the tall grass, obscuring the path in front of him as he makes his way to the privy and back. He starts setting a fire in the stove, feeling the cold creeping into the room from the cellar through the floorboards, though the cloudless pre-dawn sky promises another hot day.

Levi is already on his second cup of tea when Isabel and Farlan wake up, sneaking into the kitchen on exaggerated tiptoes not to wake Erwin. The three of them talk quietly while Farlan keeps warming the stove and Levi busies himself with the water heater, getting into a short-lived argument with Isabel about the importance of regular bathing. By the time their host finally joins them, Isabel’s neatly brushed hair is dripping water onto the kitchen floor while Farlan is frying the last of the sausages for their breakfast.

“How long did you two stay up for after we left?” Farlan asks Levi after Erwin has passed through the room on his way to the privy.

“Not long,” Levi tells him. “Not even half an hour.”

“Such wasted opportunities,” Farlan mutters to the skillet before moving the sausages onto a plate and carrying it to the table.

“Don’t start,” Levi tells him again, making the man sigh.

“I told you,” Farlan says, “you should enjoy it while you can. That’s all it’s good for in the end.”

“Enjoy what?” Isabel asks and Farlan shakes his head.

“Nothing,” he explains with a smile. “Just this place. It’s so nice, isn’t it?”

Isabel nods and sticks a piece of sausage into her mouth, spitting it back onto her plate mere seconds later after it burns her tongue, making Farlan sigh and mutter ‘little savage’ under his breath. When Erwin gets back in the kitchen they both greet him with a warm wish of good morning while Levi pours him a cup of tea, which he accepts with a smile.

“Thank you,” he says quietly. “You always brew it much better than I do.”

“It’s the love he puts in it,” Farlan hurries to tell the man, “that’s the secret.”

Levi glares at him in exasperation while Erwin hums pensively. “I’ve heard it can be surprisingly important in cooking,” he simply says, flashing them all another smile.

After breakfast they decide to go back to the river and leave the cottage after dinner late in the afternoon and it seems to Levi it’s due less to what is practical and more to the fact none of them are eager to return to the city. Erwin drives them back to the guesthouse to the dismay of the owner, who still agrees to rent them two bicycles, though different ones from the day before. When Levi and Farlan stop by the riverbank where they enjoyed the previous day, Erwin and Isabel keep going to visit a farm further along the river, promising to meet them there in a couple of hours before starting on the journey back.

Farlan leaves the bicycle leaning on a tree while Levi unfolds the quilt, spreading it on the ground and lying down, his bare ankles tickled by the grass. The air still carries that womb-like warmth that seems to descend on Levi’s body as soon as his muscles relax and he closes his eyes, feeling rather than seeing the other man lying down next to him. They stay like this for a long time, not speaking, just breathing in the summer in all its heady scents, grass and water, earth and damp, the cloyingly sweet stench of cow parsley and heliotrope. On Levi’s left Farlan sighs, sounding content.

“This’ll be a nice memory,” the man says.

Levi agrees in a mumble, looking up at the branches of the beech tree, its leaves dappled by sunlight, the green made almost painfully brilliant. He realises this will be the only memory of its kind he has, of leisurely days spent simply being, existing, and he’s not sure whether the realisation makes him sad or not. After all, isn’t it better to have even the one than to have none at all?

“I hope you know I never meant to make you sad,” Farlan continues, and it takes a moment for Levi to realise they’re not thinking of the same thing. “About you and Erwin, that is.”

Levi can’t think of anything to say, not being able to pretend there is such a thing as him and Erwin, but when a small voice in the back of his mind points out that judging by Erwin’s behaviour there could be, he doesn’t rush to silence it. He thinks of the man’s soft words, the respect in his speech, that gentleness of his touch and he frowns. Despite the fact the thing Farlan is warning him against doesn’t really exist, Levi can’t deny that he is right; these things end badly more often than not.

“I suppose I’ve lived too long to be an optimist anymore,” Farlan goes on when Levi doesn’t speak, “but I am glad you’ve found someone. And who knows? Maybe if the war ends quickly the two of you can carry on like this.”

“Do people really do that?” Levi asks him now. “People like us, did they do that before?”

Farlan falls quiet for a moment before sighing. “No, I suppose not,” he admits, sounding dejected. “I like to think that without the war Christofer and I would’ve... But I think you’re right. People like us don’t do that.”

Levi thinks back to the few men he knew like that in Berlin – well, the few men he knew the first thing about, other than the curve of their cocks – and it seemed to him then that most of them were married. He'd notice the rings on their fingers and ignore them as soon as he did; what was it to him then if they were? And Erwin, what is it to him if he's married too?

They fall quiet and Levi closes his eyes again, letting the soft rustle of leaves and the murmuring of the river fill his mind and settle the thoughts he finds too confusing for these last few hours of pleasure. He wills himself to believe even for this little while that nothing exists outside this moment; not the war, not the fear, not Dresden. After a while the sound of the wind and stream are mixed with Farlan's quiet snoring, which lulls Levi to a deep sleep. He dreams about the cottage; Erwin is sitting by the fire, his back turned to Levi, the flames painting his arms with hues of red. Levi calls out his name, but he doesn't turn and when Levi walks closer to look at his face, he sees the colour has drained from his cheeks and his arms are full of deep gashes, which pulse blood onto his shirt. The man doesn't meet his gaze even then but stares dully into the hearth, eyes flickering between life and death, hands resting limply between his knees. Levi grabs one of them in his, surprised at the sudden coldness that pierces through and wakes him along with a sudden burst of noise that forces his eyes open.

He realises he's drawn Farlan close to himself on the quilt, a habit from their years of sleeping next to one another, and when he pulls his hand off suddenly, the man starts and wakes, scrambling quickly onto his feet as he too sees the soldiers approaching them over the grass. There are five of them, young men, younger than Levi and Farlan, wearing uniforms and staring at them, exchanging muttered words that don't quite catch Levi's ear. From the sway of their steps he can tell they've been drinking which, when added to the arrogance of their swagger, sets Levi's heart beating wildly. He glances at Farlan who is straightening the hem of his shirt with shaking hands and he can't help but realise how guilty they both must look.

"What's this then?" one of the soldiers says, walking ahead of the others. "What was all that just now?"

"Nothing," Farlan stutters, running a hand through his hair. "We were just sleeping."

"Sleeping?" the soldier repeats and Farlan nods, casting a hasty glance at Levi as the other men move closer.

"Yes," Farlan says now, and something about the way he says all this makes Levi think it's not for the first time. "We just fell asleep, that's all."

"He had his arms around you," another soldier points out, nodding toward Levi, whose eyes are flying from man to man as he tries to determine the best course of action. "We all saw it."

"It was nothing," Farlan insists, shrugging and letting out a strained laugh. "He's just used to holding his girlfriend like that. Isn't that right, Lukas?"

Levi glances at the other man and nods. "That's right," he says, trying to relax his own posture when he notices Farlan's rigid one. "She loves it when I do that."

“So you’re not queer then?” the soldier asks Levi now.

“No,” Levi states, trying to fit his features with the right amount of injury at the insult.

“What’s your girlfriend’s name?” someone calls out from the group as the head of the gang steps forward and onto the quilt still lying on the ground.

“Lilian,” Levi says, the first name that comes to mind, “and you’d better get your shitty boots off my property.”

The soldier looks down at the quilt and then back up at Levi before slowly wiping the soles of his shoes on the knit before walking forward until he’s standing right in front of Levi. He can feel blood pounding in his skull as that calm sort of rage starts building up in his muscles and he stares into the soldier’s eyes, wishing them as blind and lifeless as the one’s he shot. He can smell the alcohol on the man’s breath as he looks up at his face, his mind full of Erwin’s advice.

“Sorry about that,” the man tells him, his voice full of laughter. “I was curious to see what you’re planning to do about it. Filthy fucking cocksucker.”

Levi glances behind the man at the broken blades of grass now stuck to the blanket along with dirt and dried mud. There’s a moment when none of it seems real, the calmness of before has turned too quickly to this, and for a few seconds Levi wonders whether he’s still dreaming, whether this is just a continuation of the nightmare he had before. With his body shivering with anger, Levi looks at the figure looming over him – that hint of a smirk on the man’s lips, the scar running through his eyebrow – and scoffs before spitting in his face.

There follows a calm moment when the soldier’s hands come up to his cheek to touch at the wet smear the spittle is leaving behind as it runs down towards his chin. Levi can hear Farlan gasping to his right before the man’s angry roar takes over as he lunges toward Levi, hands ready to grab a hold of him. Levi swerves almost effortlessly, coming behind the man and kicking him hard behind the knee. The force of the blow brings him to his knees and Levi wastes no time in wrapping his arm around his neck, delivering another hit with the tip of his work boot to the man’s groin as he makes to throw Levi off his back. The soldier doubles over, his hands coming down to his crotch as he gasps for breath, and before a pair of strong hands grab the back of Levi’s shirt he tightens his hold, leaving the man sprawled gagging on the ground when he’s finally pulled off him. He can hear Farlan shouting for someone to stop before a hit lands across his back and another, louder voice breaks out – Erwin’s voice.

“What the hell is going on here?!”

Levi turns around to see the man running towards them with Isabel following behind; his face is distorted in anger as he pushes through the group of soldiers to where Levi and Farlan are, casting barely a glance at the man on the ground who’s still holding a hand to his throat as he struggles unsteadily to his feet, all the while staring at Levi with a hunger for revenge lurking just beyond the surface.

“Those fucking queers,” he manages to squeeze out. “We saw them... practically fucking in public... makes me sick–”

“We were doing no such thing!” Farlan exclaims turning to Erwin. “We fell asleep, that’s it, I swear!”

Erwin looks at him and then at Levi, his thick brows knitted, and Levi can tell his mind is working feverishly, mapping out the details, coming to conclusions before he needs to ask any questions, trying to find a way out of the situation. He looks at the man rubbing at the wide red welt on his neck, his expression growing cold.

“Do you know who this is?” he asks the man, nodding toward Farlan. “He’s my cousin’s kid.”

“So?” the man asks him back. “He’s a filthy fucking—”

“You’ll want to be careful now,” Erwin interrupts him, his voice edged and quiet, “about what you accuse him of.”

“Why the fuck would I give a shit, you fucking senile bastard?”

Levi can see Erwin’s jaw tightening. “Because if you so much as fucking whisper shit like that about my cousin’s son I will drag your scrawny arse through every fucking courtroom in the Reich for defamation. Is that understood, *Gefreiter*?”

The soldier looks at Erwin defiantly but stays quiet, perhaps trying to think of what to say next, until pointing one of his sausage-like fingers at Levi. “That one was touching the other one. We all saw it. They were on that quilt and he was touching him.”

Erwin turns to Levi, his expression solemn, almost angry. “Is that true, Lukas?”

Levi looks around at the soldiers and Isabel, who has walked over to Farlan and taken his hand in hers. He glances quickly at the *Gefreiter*; the man is still crouching from the pain in his groin, and Levi feels like uttering a laugh, but doesn’t. He knows something must be resolved here, but doesn’t see the solution.

“He also spat in my face and strangled me,” the soldier goes on as neither Levi nor Erwin speaks.

“Is that true?” Erwin asks Levi again. “You spat in the face of a German soldier? You attacked him?”

“Yes,” Levi says, realising suddenly how this has to end as he sees a hint of pain on Erwin’s face. “I did do that. He called me a cocksucker so I spat at him. And choked him a little.”

The blow lands before Levi has a chance to realise it, a backhanded smack across his face that brings him down onto the ground. The forest of legs in front of him sways nauseatingly as a loud ringing starts in his ears, making him deaf to all other sounds. The pain only comes after, a sharp reminder of the strength of Erwin’s arms, though even beyond the pulsating jolts Levi wonders whether the man was holding back. He grits his teeth and winces as he manages to get an arm under himself to lean on, tasting the iron tang of blood in his mouth. He draws a breath as the sound of the river returns slowly, pushing himself to his feet before

spitting into the grass, the smear of red spoiling the spotless green, just in time to hear Erwin's final words.

"—doing more for this country than you ever will. Do you get that?"

"Yes, Herr Strumbannführer," he mutters, opening his mouth only as far as is absolutely necessary.

"Good," Erwin barks, sounding angry; Levi doesn't look at him. "Don't you fucking forget it. And if I ever see you as much as look at Friedrich again I'm going to have you sent to Buchenwald on the same fucking day. Are we clear on that?"

Levi shudders at the name, but mumbles, "Yes, Herr Sturmbannführer."

He can hear Erwin letting out a breath. "What a fucking mess," he says, more to himself than anyone else, it seems. "A perfectly good holiday fucking ruined."

Levi wants to laugh – the statement seems so accurate – but merely sighs. The whole right side of his face is throbbing with a dull sort of ache that makes him want to scrunch up his face and shout out every swear word he's ever known. As he listens to Erwin exchanging a few more words with the soldiers he tries to harden himself against it, and against the reality to which they've all now been forced to return, but something about it feels worse than it did before. Bitterly Levi goes back on his earlier thought, deciding it's not better to have memories like this.

They take their leave soon after, Erwin ordering Isabel to ride with Farlan. Levi takes a seat on the luggage carrier behind Erwin as the soldiers start to undress, laughing amongst themselves now as if nothing at all had happened, racing each other into the river. They start their journey back, stopping suddenly about half a kilometre out as Erwin jumps off his bicycle and disappears down to the riverbank through rows of thickets, coming back with a wet handkerchief, which he folds before handing to Levi.

"I'm not sure how much this will help," he says, and something about his tone makes Levi think he's simply worrying out loud. "I never wanted to... I am so—"

"Don't," Levi tells him, feeling a pain in his chest that nearly rivals the one on his face. "You don't have to do that. There's no reason for it."

Levi glances at Erwin's expression and is forced to look away; seeing all that sadness makes him want to crawl out of his own skin. He presses the handkerchief on his face gently; the cool does help, he wants to tell Erwin, but can't. He turns to Isabel and Farlan, who have stopped a few metres behind.

"Are you alright?" he asks them, receiving wordless nods as replies; there's an odd determination in Farlan's expression, a steadiness he's not used to seeing that catches his attention for a moment.

They continue on their way in a silence that lasts until they get back to the cottage and even there they say only the most necessary words to each other as they pack up their things and leave. The only one trying to start a conversation during the car ride back to Dresden is Farlan, who asks Isabel whether she liked the farm, but her evasive shrug is enough to discourage him from asking anything further, and they all fall silent again.

When they finally climb up the stairs to the apartment and shuffle in through the door, Levi can't remember a time when he felt more exhausted, more miserable, or more world-weary. As the day darkens into evening behind the windows, Farlan cooks them a modest dinner, which they eat in the persisting silence. At night Levi can't bear to get close to the other man, feeling as though something about the comfort the act used to bring them has now been lost for good, and before he falls asleep Levi wonders dully when it was that he stopped knowing how to cry.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- violence
- foul language

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Chapter nine for you! Hopefully you'll enjoy it more than I enjoyed writing it. I've been haunted by this other (small) eruri-related project for weeks now and I think it's partly the reason I'm going to give myself time to rest from Uni stuff and writing Dresden with bumping the next full chapter update of the fic until January 8th. I have something Dresden-related planned for Christmas though, I just couldn't resist.

And as I'm going on holiday for a while, I just want to say to all of you people thank you so much for commenting and responding so enthusiastically to Dresden, it means the world to me and really pushes me to write more.

I want to make a special mention of Mikoto, you can find their art on Dresden on [their blog](#). My heart literally skipped a beat. Thank you so much for this. I am humbled someone would do this.

WARNINGS AT THE END

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi wakes up to a stabbing pain in his shoulder, having spent the whole night trying to avoid laying the right side of his face against the pillow; the ache from the hit is still there under the swollen, darkening skin, making their shitty breakfast of powdered eggs and tea an ordeal rather than a pleasant meal. As Levi pushes his half-empty plate over to Isabel, he can already feel the beginnings of a headache pressing on his temples from the lack of sleep and his replies to Farlan's questions about his plans for the day are no more than barely audible grunts meant to discourage the man from asking more. Farlan seems uncharacteristically energetic, clearing plates and washing dishes, chattering all the while with Isabel, who finishes Levi's breakfast with good appetite. It seems sleeping on the events of the previous day has done them both a world of good and somewhere beyond his foul mood, Levi is glad that's the case.

"Does your face still hurt, big brother?" Isabel asks him, gesturing with her hand as he sips at his tea, the warmth of the liquid making him wince subtly as it burns against the sore inside of his cheek.

"Not too much," he fibs to keep her from worrying, but the tentative smile she flashes in his direction isn't very convincing and judging by Farlan's expression he isn't fooled either.

“Will you be seeing him today?” Farlan asks Levi, who is grateful for the change of subject, however small; the memory still stings as well.

“Not today,” Levi tells him quickly, realising that he really doesn’t want to think about Erwin, not now when he can still taste a hint of the metallic blood in his mouth, even through the strong tea. “I only work on Tuesdays and Thursdays. You know that.”

“I just thought you two might like to...” Farlan’s words trail off and he shrugs. “Well, you know. Spend some time together.”

Levi lets out a heavy sigh. “He works too,” he merely says, hoping for another change of subject as far away from this as possible. “Besides, there’s lots to do here. We’ve no food for starters.”

“Well I can take care of that,” Farlan tells him promptly, running a tea towel over a plate before placing it in the cupboard

“You’re going to go shopping?” Isabel asks him, getting another shrug as a response.

“Why not?” Farlan states with a smile. “I wouldn’t mind a bit of fresh air.”

Levi can sense Isabel’s eyes on him, but doesn’t turn to look. “If you want to do it I’m not going to argue,” he tells Farlan, noting the strangeness of his behaviour but opting to ignore it. “Take some money from the drawer. And you should go soon or you’ll end up waiting in line all day and finding nothing.”

“So are you going to Erwin’s then?”

Levi shakes his head before getting to his feet. “I told you,” he mutters, wanting to escape the line of questioning, “I only work on Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

“Can I please come with you, Farlan?” Isabel asks the man who agrees to Levi’s relief; he’d rather not inflict his terrible mood on them for the whole day.

After they leave Levi finds to his dismay that the apartment becomes too quiet, lifeless and devoid of things to distract him from thinking, and he realises it must have been about a year since he was last alone like this in his own home with Farlan being barely brave enough to take a shit without asking someone to walk him to the bathroom. Without remembering what he used to do when left alone before, Levi walks aimlessly from room to room, dusts the shelves that hardly need dusting, sweeps and scrubs the floors that haven’t got a single stain on them just to fill the silence with something else than the mess of memories in his head. He opens the windows to let in that summer air that seemed so gentle just a day before but now seems full of the stench of the city, dust from the streets carrying up in the slight breeze, a constant reminder to Levi of what he gained and lost so suddenly.

He lies down on the lumpy old sofa in the sitting room and wonders what Farlan does here all day by himself, glancing at the desk and realising he probably writes those letters he never sends to anyone and reads the same couple dozen books, his favourites, over and over again until every word is imprinted into his mind for good. Levi glares at the backs of the worn-out

copies of books and clicks his tongue, not understanding the attraction: surely there are better ways to distract yourself from how fucking terrible your life is than going through the trouble of making sense of words no one in the real world would ever even think of, let alone speak out loud.

He remembers suddenly the bare white walls of his classroom from when he was a little boy, and the way the teacher used to make them read aloud. When Levi's turn came, the letters would suddenly start chasing each other around the page like wild rabbits, the esses and doubleyous scattering across the lines, making him stutter as he fought the sentences out of his mouth slowly enough to make his classmates giggle. His teacher told him to ask for a parent to help him with his reading – well, needless to say he never even suggested such a thing to Kenny, who remained blissfully ignorant to Levi's growing dislike of the written word.

As Levi's fingers push under the waist of his trousers to scratch at an itch and venture further along the patch of hair, he realises this must be another way how Farlan makes the hours go by. He remembers that too from his youth, that insatiable urge that would take over him at the most inconvenient of times. They were usually moments of boredom with him sitting behind the counter of their empty little shop with its half-empty shelves, wondering whether anyone would notice him disappearing for five minutes of privacy in the bathroom upstairs. Later there were whole days and evenings with Kenny off somewhere talking politics when Levi would close the shop early just to take advantage of that solitude, to enjoy not having to pinch his lips together and keep his bed from creaking. On some of those days, Levi remembers now, he made the act far more elaborate than it needed to be, but that kind of embellishment seems to have disappeared when the war broke out; these days everything – if it happens in the first place – has a kind of urgency, a sense of necessity rather than indulgence that wasn't there before. Levi sighs quietly as he pulls his hand out and lays it on his chest; it seems as though it's been so long since he's done it that his body has all but lost interest.

He stares up at the ceiling before closing his eyes, massaging his aching jaw, trying not to let it remind him of the terrifying force of Erwin's arm as his hand fell across his face. He tries to picture the man like he was before that, nothing but kind and accommodating, observing Levi to find ways to make him feel better, but the image seems disconnected from the present. Just like Farlan's arms around him during the night, something seems severed and changed to the point where Levi can't see how things could have been different before, or how they could go back to that now.

He sits up on the sofa abruptly, leaning his elbows on his knees and fighting to clear his mind, to stop feeling and thinking so much. After all, it's no good dwelling on things you can't change, to sit still and make yourself lose your mind over how fucking terrible it all is, like Farlan does. Levi wonders whether he could ever turn out like that, if he suddenly stopped distracting himself from it all, whether all the pain in his past would eventually drown out the stubbornness of that instinct that tells him to keep moving, to keep fighting, to keep living even if he's never been able to tell what the fuck it's all supposed to be for. Suddenly it all seems so pointless. So what if the war ended tomorrow? How much better could things possibly be for him, with no family, no education, nothing but petty change in

his pocket? Who, if the war ended, would still want to hire a Jew, and one of the last left in Germany by the look of things?

After all, that was the reason he decided to get false papers in the first place. Not long after Kenny was taken away they came to take over the shop and Levi realised he would need something else to keep him from starving in the street. For the shop and the apartment above it they paid him a measly sum which, along with whatever he could scrape together from selling everything he and Kenny owned, he used to pay a ratty little man for the false papers; it was his fortune he knew the right kind of people. He slept wherever he could until he got his hands on them, staying with sordid acquaintances, living on the street when he felt it preferable, which wasn't often in December. After that things got easier, but even in a city the size of Berlin Levi felt too much like he kept running into people he knew, or rather people who used to know him. Dresden seemed far enough then, big enough for him to lose himself in a crowd and furthermore, it was as far as he could afford to go with a one-way ticket, which only added to its appeal.

Levi isn't sure now what made him think it all those years ago, that people weren't being deported just to be resettled in some less favourable, less Aryan corner of the Reich. Maybe it was all in the attitude of the police when he went to ask about his uncle a few days after Kristallnacht when he hadn't come home; the way they looked at him so mockingly told Levi he should never have bothered, and that as far as he was concerned Kenny was as good as dead. Maybe it was just the speeches he would hear on the radio, the promises of the total annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe, that had gotten stuck in his head like a constant warning reminding him that if any German Jews were to be taken away, it would be the poor bastard sons of whores who would go first. Even before he ran into Krieger and started to realise how ruthless the reality of it all was, Levi certainly knew enough not to want to be turned into a part of any labour force for the Nazis – the way they had looked at him like he was hardly human was enough to make him lose faith in any decent treatment they may have promised.

Levi pushes himself to his feet, knowing he could go down this road much further than is wise, all the way back to the days his mother lay dying with him understanding too little of it all to even cry. He feels now he must have cried at some point, later perhaps when he'd had time to realise what had happened and miss his mother, though he can't remember having done so, not then or ever since. He shakes his head almost angrily before walking swiftly into the kitchen to arrange the cupboards, a task that manages to occupy him until Farlan and Isabel return despite the fact there's hardly anything on the shelves to begin with.

"You alright?" Levi asks them both, expecting Farlan to be at least a bit shaken, but the man seems as energetic as before as he nods and lifts the shopping on the table; it seems heavier than Levi would have expected.

"I bought some pork for dinner tonight," he replies, sounding cheerful and enthusiastic. "Granted, it's not a very good cut, but I should be able to make something of it."

Levi and Isabel share a look and the girl shrugs, clearly as puzzled as Levi by this sudden change in Farlan's behaviour. Levi wonders whether he should address it somehow, but reminding the man of how he was before doesn't seem like a good idea, and he lets it go,

both relieved to know Farlan will be able to share some of the responsibilities around the house, and dismayed there isn't more for him to do now.

"We got some potatoes as well, and some carrots. It's a shame it's too early for apples, those would have gone very well with the pork, I think," Farlan goes on, emptying the shopping onto the table before asking, "Do you think we should invite Erwin for dinner?"

"Why would we do that?" Levi counters irritably, frowning and wishing the man would take a hint and shut up about Erwin already; it doesn't seem his wish will be granted, judging by Farlan's unconcerned shrug.

"I thought you might have liked to," he explains, falling quiet for a moment and giving Levi an unimpressed glance. "I hope you're not still sore about that slap he gave you. It really wasn't his fault you know."

Levi glares at Farlan, but doesn't disagree with him though he wishes he could. "You shouldn't have spent so much money," he tells the man instead to change the subject, making him cluck his disapproval.

"One pork and potato stew and we're suddenly bankrupt," he mutters to himself as he lifts the skillet onto the stove. "I thought you got a job so we wouldn't have to live on nothing but cabbage."

"Who knows how long I'll work for him," Levi tells Farlan sullenly. "He'll leave soon, so we had better save everything he gives me."

"Where is Erwin going to go?" Isabel asks, sounding worried; on any other day that tone of voice would have made Levi take back what he said, but today he doesn't feel like softening his words.

"To the front," he states sourly, realising it must be true, that Erwin must be leaving soon just like he told Lilian he would. "That's where we'll all go before long if we're not careful."

"Do I have to go?" Isabel asks him now and he shakes his head.

"Only the men go to the front," he explains in a disinterested monotone. "You'll stay here and make bombs in a factory or something so we'll have more things to kill people with"

"Stop it," Farlan snaps at Levi, taking a break from setting a fire under the stove. "None of us is going anywhere, including Erwin. I don't know what's gotten into you, Levi, that you have to scare Isabel like that."

Levi leans the non-aching side of his face against his hand, looking for remorse as he turns to stare at the bedroom door but finding none. He wishes again he had somewhere to go or something to do; he can feel the idleness already, that annoying nagging that starts in his head, but he knows walking around aimlessly won't lift it any more than scrubbing the floors did. He wishes he could tell Farlan he'll get dinner ready, but the man is already busy frying his precious pork and chances are Levi would just ruin the meat anyway. Without saying anything more to Levi, Isabel moves over to her bed and starts flipping through the book of

botany she filched from the cottage and the kitchen grows quiet save for the sizzling of the meat in the frying pan; even that sound, with the salty rich scent that comes with it, makes Levi want to pound his head against the table until he knocks himself out, the thought of eating seems so pointless.

In the absence of anything to do he tries to sleep, burying his good cheek into the pillow and closing his eyes, trying to ignore the quiet hum of the city in the distance. His mind keeps returning to Erwin, over and over and over, no matter how many times he forces his thoughts to another path. He sees the man standing in front of him, still and strong, that hint of apology never far from his eyes as he looks at Levi; it seems too close to pity for him to feel anything but angered by it. He thinks of Farlan's words and sneers to himself in the darkening room. Of course it wasn't Erwin's fault, of course he didn't mean to do it and even when he did, he held back as much as he could. Levi knew it right away, that the man hadn't hit him as hard as he could – if he had his jaw would probably be floating down the Elbe right now. No, there is no way to blame Erwin for any of it – no way to blame anyone. It's just how things are, how his life has to be, how it's always been, being spat on for reasons he can barely understand, for a bit of dirty blood, for a bit of missing skin on his cock. And who's Levi to say anything to that, to tell them it's not right, to tell them he doesn't deserve it somehow?

He's barely managed to drift off to sleep when Farlan bursts into the room, telling Levi there has been a knock on the door he's been too nervous to answer. In the state of mind he's in, Levi barely manages to feel concerned, though he glances quickly out the window to see if any strange cars are parked outside. When he sees none, he crosses the apartment to the door and opens it to let in Frau Niemeyer, Frau Schultz, and Frau Gernhardt, who greets Isabel warmly as she enters the sitting room.

"Would you mind going downstairs to sit with Bruno and Hanna for a little while?" she asks her immediately. "I know they'll be fine by themselves but–"

"I'll go!" Isabel tells her excitedly before disappearing through the door, nearly knocking Frau Schultz over in the process without stopping to apologise.

"Manners!" she shouts at her back before shaking her head angrily and walking further into the apartment, brushing some imaginary lint off her skirt.

"Something smells good," Frau Niemeyer comments as she walks into the room and sits down on the armchair by the desk. "What is that, pork?"

"I'm making a stew," Farlan tells her, looking pleased though his hands are still shaking slightly as he turns toward Frau Schultz. "Please, have a seat."

"Oh, I don't know if we'll be staying that long," Frau Schultz tells him briskly, eyeing the apartment with apparent curiosity; she's only visited them a handful of times before. "We were just wondering whether you lot would have something for the basement."

"We just thought, you know, if there will be bombings here as well it might be nicer in the cellar with some chairs and things," Frau Gernhardt explains further, smiling despite the

subject being a shade darker than most every-day things. "I hear it's what they've been doing in Berlin."

"Maybe some of those sofa cushions," Frau Schultz suggests, walking over to them and testing their firmness with her hand appraisingly. "Might be better to sit on than the floor."

"They're certainly better to sleep on than the floor," Levi remarks dryly, leaning on the desk; his words draw the woman's attention and she turns to look at him in surprise.

"Is this where you sleep?" she asks him incredulously, drawing her hand away like somehow touching the sofa has become inappropriate.

"We only have the two beds," Levi tells her. "Where did you think I sleep, next to him?" He nods toward Farlan, making Frau Schultz blush, embarrassed.

"I never implied any such thing!" she cries out, looking scandalised while Farlan sighs wearily.

"Never mind Lukas," he tells her almost soothingly. "He has a bad habit of making fun of other people. As for the basement, we may have a chair or two we can carry down."

"That would be lovely," Frau Gernhardt replies, sounding grateful. "I know none of us have too much to spare, times being hard like this, but I thought if we all work together we could make this a little more pleasant for everyone."

"It's certainly frightening enough as it is," Frau Schultz says, walking around the room in a manner Levi supposes is meant to be inconspicuous, peering down at the titles of the books on the shelf. "Have you seen those poor people coming into the city, with their carts and suitcases? I pray to God every night to keep us from that fate!"

"My prayers are with them also," Farlan says, sounding so pious that Levi nearly bursts out laughing. "Every time I see pictures on the paper of Berlin... It was my home for so long and now it seems little more than a pile of rubble. And all those beautiful buildings—"

"It would truly be a shame if it happened here as well," Frau Schultz interrupts him suddenly and loudly. "I've always thought Dresden more beautiful than Berlin myself, in some ways at least. More culture, you know, and more parks and such."

"Though of course I'm less worried about the buildings," Farlan hurries to add, "than I am about the people inside the buildings."

"Oh, but of course," Frau Schultz agrees, like no one could ever suggest otherwise. "Those poor souls. It breaks my heart not to be able to do more. And after all they've been through!"

"At least they're still alive," Levi remarks dispassionately. "I feel worse for all those people buried in the piles of rubble."

The room grows quiet as everyone nods along without knowing what to say; Frau Gernhardt looks just about ready to shed a tear for all the innocent lives lost in the bombings and despite

his liking the woman, Levi feels like rolling his eyes at the hypocrisy of it, how some lives are worth crying over and others are barely worth a shrug.

“They practise these things,” Frau Niemeyer speaks up suddenly, “in the other cities, so things will run smoothly when they need to. That’s the other thing we came here for.”

“Yes,” Frau Gernhardt takes over, sniffing a little before addressing her next words to Levi. “We were wondering if you’d be willing to take that on.”

Levi feels like groaning out loud, but resists. “I don’t know,” he starts evasively, wondering whether he would have felt any more inclined to agree on any other occasion. “What if I’m working during an actual bombing? Wouldn’t it be better if someone who’s here all the time were to do it?”

“None of us are here all the time, Herr Weller,” Frau Schultz counters briskly and patronisingly. “We all have things to do, people to visit. And you know how long shopping takes these days.”

“I can do it,” Farlan promises suddenly to everyone’s blatant surprise, not least of all Levi’s, who can’t help but wonder whether the man has actually lost his mind. “I’m here more often than Lukas is, and I’d really love to help.”

The three women all look at each other, their expressions full of doubt and Levi knows they’ve all heard the rumours, of Farlan being a little on the slow side, or prone to bouts of melancholy, or being overall badly suited for the sort of life most people lead, at the very least. Unstable enough to be turned down by the army, that’s what Levi was aiming for but, he realises suddenly, perhaps reliable enough to take on something like this.

“I think that’s a better idea,” Levi voices quickly, hoping his assessment will be enough to convince the women; after all, if Farlan truly wants to burden himself with this who is Levi to tell him no? “Herr Sturmbannführer has me working late often enough, and I can’t promise I’ll be here when I’m needed.”

“Would this Herr Sturmbannführer be the tall and handsome fellow we saw you all leaving with on Friday?” Frau Niemeyer asks, her voice dripping with curiosity, and Levi nods, remembering the old woman peering through her curtains at them as they loaded the car.

“He was kind enough to take us along to a cottage he owns,” he explains briefly, hoping not to invite any further questions about the trip.

“What exactly is it that you do for him, if I may ask?”

“I’m his housekeeper,” Levi tells her in an uninterested monotone. “Mostly I clean his apartment.”

“Indeed?” Frau Niemeyer says, but to Levi’s relief doesn’t get into the apparent strangeness of male housekeepers. “And what does Herr Sturmbannführer do?”

“He’s with the SS-Personalhauptamt,” he tells the old woman who nods, though Levi wonders whether she understands what that means.

“And he’s not married? At his age?” Frau Niemeyer goes on, making Levi feel like groaning again, not least of all because he still isn’t sure of the answer.

“Not as far as I can tell,” he says, turning back to Farlan, who’s still smiling. “So we’re agreed? Friedrich will take care of the matter?”

The women look at each other again, Frau Schultz shrugs and thus they seem to be in agreement. “We just thought it would be better to have a man help with the whole thing,” she tells them matter-of-factly, resting her hands on her wide hips. “Someone with a touch of authority.”

Levi glances at Farlan and thinks Frau Schultz herself has ten times the authority the man is likely to ever have, but keeps his mouth shut, uttering instead, “Well, if you think it’s for the best.”

“Should we go see the cellar?” Frau Gernhardt asks them now, her sing-song voice in strange contrast to Frau Schultz’s low one. “You could take the chairs as we go.”

With these words Farlan walks into the kitchen to remove the fourth chair from around their small table – they have very little use for it, after all – while Levi grabs a hold of a considerably heavier one with armrests that has sat mostly unused in the corner of their sitting room since they moved in. They make their way down the stairs and into the basement, a dark and dusty place lit only by an old oil lamp Frau Schultz has donated to the cause. Levi smells the air tentatively, deciding that the relative cleanness of the room will do, as long as he doesn’t need to spend large amounts of time in it.

“We’ll need a reserve of candles and holders,” Frau Niemeyer states, taking a seat in the chair Farlan has laid in the corner. “Some water would be good as well, but I suppose it would go stale by the time we’d drink it.”

Frau Schultz heaves a heavy sigh, crinkling her nose as she looks around the room. “We’ll take turns cleaning,” she decides for the rest of them. “Maybe you can assist us there at least, Herr Weller? Since it seems to be your speciality, so to speak.”

“Of course,” Levi says to appease the woman, walking over to the back wall where the bricks look newer than in the rest of the room, remembering the week some time ago when builders came to augment the basement after an announcement about air-raid safety measures. “So this is what they did down here,” he mutters to himself, running a finger along the rough mortar between the stones.

“They knocked down the heavy wall and put up a thinner one,” Frau Gernhardt explains. “It’s in case the basement fills with smoke or the building collapses so we’ll be able to make a way into the next one.”

“That’s clever,” Farlan says, and Levi nods along, though he’s wondering what they’ll do if the next building collapses, and the one after that. The network of basements couldn’t be

endless, of course; they would all have to end up somewhere, all the people from all the buildings.

“All of this is just a precaution, of course,” Frau Schultz tells them, sounding optimistic. “It’s not likely Dresden will be hit – the British bombers can’t get this far. My son told me.”

“Well there’s a relief,” Frau Niemeyer mutters, getting slowly to her feet. “Was this it? I need to have a lie down.”

“And my stew is still on the stove,” Farlan seems to remember and they all take their leave, agreeing to all buy a half a dozen candles for the reserve before parting on the stairs.

As soon as they’re back in the apartment Farlan rushes into the kitchen to make sure his stew hasn’t burned, humming to himself as he throws in a sprig of thyme. Levi follows him more slowly, sitting down at the table and watching him waltz around the room, suddenly without a care in the world when just a few days ago it was all he had. Levi tries to come to some conclusion about what has caused all this, wondering whether the incident by the river scared Farlan quite literally out of his mind.

“What’s come over you then?” he finally asks the man, who gives him a disinterested glance over his shoulder as he stirs the stew. “First the shopping and now this?”

“I meant what I said,” Farlan insists almost cheerfully. “I want to help. And what’s it to you if I go outside? Haven’t you been telling me to do that all along?”

“I suppose,” Levi replies, still frowning. “You should make sure they don’t rely on you too much, though.”

“In case I die?”

The question takes Levi by surprise, rendering him speechless, though it’s not far from what he meant. Farlan glances at him again and sighs, fishing a piece of pork onto the ladle and tasting it before placing the lid back on the pot and turning to him.

“I didn’t mean that,” Levi hurries to clarify despite Farlan’s relaxed expression. “I just meant we might have to leave, to go into hiding somewhere or–”

“It’s fine,” Farlan tells him calmly. “I told you, I’ve been thinking about things. And after what happened... I don’t know, I guess it’s only a matter of time, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Levi argues, getting suddenly angry despite his own hopelessness. “I’ve told you before, there’s no reason we can’t all–”

“Yes, yes,” Farlan interrupts him impatiently, waving his hand in that effeminate way. “Honestly, I wish you’d just leave it, Levi. I much prefer my way of seeing things for now.”

As the man turns back to mix the stew, Levi is left staring at his back, wondering whether he should keep arguing, to keep trying to convince Farlan that death isn’t lurking behind every corner, that bombs won’t start falling out of the sky, that armed men won’t storm into their home and drive them out into the street and shoot them. He looks at the man’s composure,

the ease of his posture, the steadiness of his hands, and stays quiet. Those are promises he can't keep, Levi knows all too well, and realises there is nothing he can say that will speak louder to Farlan than that voice of reason in his head. And what else is it than reason? There is no sense in denying it's the most likely end to all of this; it's simply the type of poison that will do the job that remains unknown.

The stew at least is delicious, better than anything Levi has eaten in ages; it's a wonder Farlan has managed to get so much flavour into it, especially considering how much of it there is, enough for their lunch the following day though they've all had generous helpings the evening before. While Levi does the dishes, Farlan and Isabel get into a playful fight over who gets to go through the edges of the pot with a slice of bread to mop up the rest of the gravy. The girl wins of course, giving Farlan a small bite of her bread as a consolation prize.

"Do you suppose you could ask Erwin to get me some cigarettes?" Farlan asks Levi a few hours later as he's heading out the door. "I have such a craving after the weekend."

"He's not a shopkeeper," Levi tells him sourly, making Farlan sigh audibly.

"Clearly he knows where to get them," the man insists. "All you have to do is ask. If he says no that'll be the end of it."

Levi gives the man an irritated glare before stepping into the hallway; by the time he's crossing the bridge he's forgotten all about Farlan's request. There's an unpleasant feeling that won't leave him be, an uneasiness that he's not experienced before. The closer he gets to Erwin's apartment, the more slowly his steps fall until he's barely shuffling along, like all his reluctance has poured from his head into his legs. When he gets to the garden wall he stops altogether, looking up at the bedroom window, wondering what his life would be like now had he not climbed in through it. Simpler, no doubt, and safer too, free from all that confusion that has begun to plague his mind. He thinks of Erwin, all those times he has helped him get dressed, ironed his shirts, done his laundry. Maybe it's just what people like him do, serve other people, help them and make their lives better instead of improving their own. It was his own suggestion, after all, to be the man's housekeeper, and Levi supposes on some level it must mean he doesn't believe his life is meant for anything better than that.

He climbs the stairs arduously, knocking on the door louder than is necessary to hide his reluctance. When Erwin answers Levi pushes into the apartment in that rude way he used to before, though it's clear the man doesn't mind it anymore. Levi keeps his eyes on the floor, the coarse grey fabric of the uniform trousers at the edge of his vision another reminder that this is how things are again, what his life is: scrubbing floors, doing dishes, a routine of servitude he hasn't realised to resent before. He walks into the kitchen to get started on tea, hearing Erwin hurrying after him.

"No, please," the man tells him, taking the pot firmly from his hands, his fingers brushing against Levi's, warm but not comforting. "Let me."

Levi glances up at his face almost disinterestedly before sighing and taking a seat at the table, thinking it preferable to arguing with Erwin over something so petty as who'll be making the tea. He doesn't know why he grudges the man for the gesture so much now, why that care

he's always taken with Levi feels suddenly condescending rather than kind. He is still avoiding the man's gaze when he joins him at the table some minutes later.

"How are you?" Erwin asks as soon as he's taken a seat, sounding worried and guilty. "Does your face still hurt?"

Levi grits his teeth not to snap at the man and ask him whether he's a fucking idiot. In his mind he can't help thinking what a fucking stupid question that is, less than two days after what happened. Coming from Erwin who is usually so careful and sharp it feels even more irritating.

"It's getting better," Levi mutters instead, rubbing absently at the spot, almost preferring the pain to the unpleasant hollowness in his chest.

"I know a doctor," the man goes on; for a moment it seems as though he's about to reach out his hand to mimic Levi's touch. "Someone reliable. He could take a look at it if--"

"No," Levi interrupts him, glancing up again and regretting it; the fretful frown on Erwin's face makes him cringe. "I don't need a doctor. I'll be fine in a couple of days."

"I tried to hold back," Erwin explains with an urgency to his voice. "I wish you to know that I didn't--"

"I know," Levi tells him, meeting his gaze more to calm him than because he wants to. "I don't want to talk about it."

Erwin is still frowning as he nods. "I understand," he barely says, and they fall quiet for so long Levi begins to wonder what they ever had to talk about before.

They drink their tea in the persisting silence and Levi gets wordlessly to work, too weary to even feel resentful about it. He can sense Erwin following him with his eyes from his usual place at the secretaire and as long as he's within the man's field of vision, Levi dreads he's going to say something, voice some of that concern etched so distinctly on his features now. When Levi finally walks back into the kitchen to pack up the food, Erwin joins him so quickly Levi can tell he's been paying attention to his movements all the while.

"You're leaving already?" he asks, sounding disappointed as Levi grunts, placing a tin of sardines into a brown paper bag. "I thought you would've stayed a bit longer."

"What for?" Levi asks him flatly, turning to face that puzzled expression for a few seconds. "I've got nothing left to do here."

"I suppose I no longer feel like you only come here to clean," Erwin explains quietly after a moment of confused silence. "I was rather hoping you'd feel the same way. I hardly consider myself your employer and I would be sad to hear you only see me as such."

Levi scoffs. "I think it's pretty clear how you'd like me to see you," he tells the man sourly, "and truth be told I'd rather just think of you as the person whose shitty apartment I clean."

Levi turns his eyes quickly back to the food he's packing to avoid being responsible for whatever his words have made Erwin feel; just imagining the man's expression is enough to make him grit his teeth against the instant shame he feels. The silence that falls between them bears no resemblance to the ease they had before; instead it seems to be full of Levi's regret and his inability to take back what he has said though he wants to.

"I see," Erwin finally says, his voice suddenly as emotionless as it was that day when they first met. "I'll make sure to keep out of your way in the future while you do your job."

He leaves the kitchen and returns to his typewriter; Levi doesn't wish him goodbye when he exits the apartment. The walk back home seems to take him longer than ever as Levi tries to keep himself from wondering what made him say what he said, too tired to get into it and too involved not to. He thinks about Erwin swimming with him in the river, thinks about his easy smiles and childish jokes and those peaceful moments in the garden, those quiet conversations that seemed so effortlessly to be about the most important things and nothing in particular. Something of it is still holding Levi, like he hasn't managed to make sense of it, the singularity of that weekend in the bleakness of his life. How could it all have turned so quickly into this again, all this anger and resentment and this miserable half-life relentlessly forced upon him?

As he crosses the bridge again in the gathering darkness, something in Levi wishes he could just end it all, to finally stop fighting and trying to force something that isn't possible, a halfway decent life in this shithole of a country. He looks down into the river, the swirling water nearly black in the faint shadow of the bridge, and thinks about what Farlan said, wonders whether it really is only a matter of time. Wouldn't now be better than later? There would be no more of that constant worrying, the constant fear, the constant struggle with himself and with everyone else. No more of that pain on Erwin's face that makes Levi want to gauge his own eyes out.

He stares out along the river, the lavender hues of the sky reflecting dully on the fluctuating surface and submits to the knowledge that's been there all along; no matter how bad things get, Levi could never end it himself. His mother had starved herself, clung onto life until her last breath long after she had stopped being able to get up from the stinking mattress on which she slept. Kenny was the same, stubborn unto death; Levi is almost certain he's still alive somewhere, refusing to die out of spite if nothing else. He holds the bag of food closer to his chest and sighs before continuing on his way home, wondering whether it's something he lacks, or something he has too much of, that makes the thought so impossible in the end.

When he closes the door behind himself, Levi suddenly remembers the cigarettes but doesn't mention them, grateful when Farlan doesn't either; it seems his gloomy expression is enough to warn the man against it. Instead Farlan makes them all a surprise dessert of peaches and cream; Levi appreciates the gesture though it does little to help his mood. He goes to bed after dinner, suddenly understanding what it was that made Farlan stay in bed for days on end; there's a tiredness he can't seem to shake, a weariness that makes him miss breakfast the following morning. He only wakes when Farlan has finished cooking lunch.

"We should go out today," he tells Levi and Isabel over the meal. "We should go to Großer Garten, have a picnic."

“Could we?” Isabel asks Levi who wishes he could say no, that it’s not worth the risk, that he’d rather spend the day in the basement than outside in the sun, among people, but it seems so unkind, to give her one weekend of joy and deny all chances of finding more.

“We could ask Erwin to come with us,” Farlan suggests, staring at Levi like he’s eager to see his reaction.

“No,” Levi says at once, willing himself not to look at the man, not wanting to feed his curiosity. “We should go by ourselves.”

“Why don’t you want to invite him?” the man pries, making Levi grit his teeth. “Have you two had an argument?”

“I don’t want to see him,” Levi snaps, feeling a sting of guilt again at the reminder. “It’s none of your fucking business why.”

To Levi’s surprise Farlan utters a quiet laugh. “Keep it to yourself then,” he says staying cheerful despite Levi’s indignant tone. “So, what time should we go?”

They leave the apartment a few hours later, crossing into the city centre and finding a spot in the park by a glimmering pond. The pleasantly warm day has drawn others out of their homes as well, mothers with their children, elderly couples, soldiers entertaining young women with stories of their bravery under enemy fire. Farlan sits down and stretches out his legs, looking around himself curiously without a hint of the previous apprehension Levi has grown so used to that seeing the man so relaxed makes him uneasy. He takes a seat in the grass, his armpits starting to sweat already under the hot sun. He keeps an eye on Isabel who has stopped an older woman out walking her dog; they’ve started a lively conversation while she pets the animal. Suddenly Levi wishes he could leave, to find some place that would make him feel better than this, realising dully that such a place doesn’t seem to exist anymore.

“Doesn’t this make you feel better?” Farlan asks him, turning his face toward the sun and closing his eyes. “I always loved summer.”

Levi grunts in agreement since there’s no point in arguing, looking around at the soldiers and feeling nervous despite the fact they seem to be paying them no mind. He can see Farlan casting glances in their direction as well, but his are curious where Levi’s are wary.

“It’s how men are, you know,” Farlan suddenly tells Levi, looking at him almost patronisingly. “He’ll make it up to you if you let him, though.”

“What?” Levi asks him, frowning when he realises whom Farlan is referring to.

“I’m just saying,” Farlan states and shrugs. “They do that sort of thing sometimes, fists instead of words. It’s not really his fault, Erwin’s.”

Levi looks at Farlan in utter silence for a few seconds. “So you’re saying it’s not his fault,” he starts slowly, wondering whether Farlan could really be so stupid, “because men just do that sort of thing?”

“Exactly,” the man confirms and shrugs again, “and to be honest, I feel like you’re being really unfair. I mean, it’s clear you’ve still not forgiven him, and he apologised days ago.”

Levi gets up abruptly, looking down at Farlan’s puzzled expression. “Try to take your eyes off those soldiers every once in a while to make sure Isabel doesn’t get into trouble,” he tells the man before taking his leave, ignoring Farlan calling after him.

He spends a few hours alone in the apartment before Isabel gets back, mentioning something about Farlan deciding to stay behind before running over to Frau Gernhardt’s to listen to the radio with Hanna and Bruno. Levi lies sullenly on the sofa, determined not to give Farlan another thought, but when midnight draws nearer and the man still hasn’t returned, he starts to feel a cold dread taking over his resolve. Even Isabel seems restless, walking from window to window and peering down onto the street until Levi manages to convince her to go to bed, saying Farlan will be back by the time she wakes up, though he knows better than to promise something like that. He tries to get some sleep as well but can’t, feeling the other man’s absence in the way the bed stays too cool and quiet.

He dozes off some time later, waking up abruptly to a faint sound carrying in from the bedroom door. He sits up and turns on the light, blinking at the sudden brightness and squinting at Farlan, who is laying his shoes by the door, breathing heavily.

“What the hell are you doing?” Levi asks him loudly enough to make the man shush at him. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know,” Farlan tells him, bursting suddenly into a breathless chuckle. “Pretty late, I’d imagine. Or early.”

“What are you doing?” Levi asks him again, in a whisper this time. “Where the fuck have you been? It’s the middle of the fucking night!”

“Me?” Farlan asks him back, pulling off his trousers; the movement makes Levi notice the slight shaking of his hands. “Nowhere really,” the man tells him, chuckling again through his panting breaths.

“Are you drunk?” Levi inquires incredulously. “Are you out of your fucking mind? Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

“Please,” Farlan drawls, fighting his way out of his shirt. “I’m not drunk, and I’m not crazy. I’ve just been...” His words trail off as he starts laughing under his breath again.

“What?” Levi hisses at him, growing angry now. “What have you been?”

“I’ve just been taking a page out your book, Levi,” the man tells him, still smiling. “What? You think you’re the only one who gets to do that?”

“Do what?” Levi demands, getting angrier by the second.

“Granted, he wasn’t nearly as handsome as Erwin, but I suppose it doesn’t do to be too picky,” Farlan thinks aloud as he climbs into bed and lays his head on the pillow, breathing

heavily. "I never thought it would be like that, though. I guess I should have asked you more about it." He turns to look at Levi's confused expression. "Not to imply anything about your character per se, but we might as well be honest, don't you think?"

"What the hell did you do, Farlan?" Levi asks the man again, making him sigh.

"Just... made a friend, that's all," he replies evasively, a lazy smile playing on his lips as he pulls the covers on top of himself.

"For fuck's sake," Levi breathes, wondering whether he should be angry or amused. "Have you any idea how fucking stupid that is? Do you have any idea how badly that could have ended? What if he had followed you here?"

"Don't be ridiculous. In any case, it's not any worse than what you're up to with Erwin," Farlan tells him calmly. "Besides, like I said, it's only a matter of time. Do you have any idea how long it's been since someone last touched me like that?"

Levi looks at Farlan and feels his anger subsiding; he wishes he could tell the man he knows that feeling, that yearning to be held and guided, that rush and heat and adventure. He realises it must be worse for Farlan who had someone before all this, someone he loved and cherished; from what Levi gathers it must double the pleasure when you actually care, though he wouldn't know. He can see the man's cheeks growing flushed and lies down next to him.

"And clearly I'm still alive," Farlan tells him, yawning widely, "so I'd count this as a victory. Though like I said, it wasn't exactly what I thought it would be."

"You never did that?" Levi asks him. "Back in Berlin?"

"Just with Christofer," Farlan replies, his expression growing nostalgic. "We had to sneak around, of course, though a lot less than you'd think. My parents were under no illusions after a while, so we could act more freely. His parents were the trouble, really. Well, them and everyone else, I suppose."

Levi nods along, turning on his back and folding his arms under his head. In all their years of living together, Farlan hasn't told him more than a handful of things about how it was between them and, feeling suddenly curious, Levi asks, "Where did you meet?"

"In the Jugend," Farlan tells him, his whispering voice growing hoarse. "We went to different schools and wanted such different things. It's a miracle we even got along. Not that we did all the time. He used to drive me mad, he was so naïve sometimes. I remember I didn't speak to him for a month when he joined the party. But you know, there was something..." His words falter and he clears his throat. "What about you and Erwin?"

Levi scoffs. "I was running from the Gestapo," he explains briefly, letting his thoughts drift back all those months, "and I climbed in through his bedroom window. That's all there is to it, really."

Farlan nods and yawns again. "I guess that's what it comes down to," he mumbles, closing his eyes. "It's all just chance and providence, isn't it? Out of all the windows you happened

upon his – the one officer who wouldn't kill you instantly. I mean, what are the chances of that?"

Levi agrees in a grunt, lying awake long after Farlan has started snoring softly on his right. He thinks about that day again and how he's never believed in God – or rather thought that if there is one, he must have the shittiest sense of humour – but something about Farlan's words resonates within him and won't let him fall back to sleep. It was the strangest coincidence, his meeting Erwin like that, the first happy accident in his life since he sat next to Farlan on that train headed to Dresden. He wonders what he should do now: should he apologise, explain he didn't mean what he said, tell Erwin he doesn't know what to think of *them*?

Levi knows what having friends feels like; Erwin isn't his friend, not like Farlan is, or Isabel. There's that odd balance Levi has never learned how to navigate; how to be more than that but less than something else, or worse yet, how to be so much more than just friends, plain and simple. And how to go about asking someone about that – do people ask each other about that? The definitions have always confused him, as well as the rituals and other intricacies that go with them, the shifts of emotion that have always made him uneasy. He can see now how in the past he preferred things that had no future – few things did, or do even now – and it suited him fine since the feelings there were simple, tangible, physical.

This is different, Erwin is different, there is no reference, no map, no past experience to guide him through this, the turmoil, the warm and the cold and the searing hot. And there are limitations now, uneasiness that didn't exist before, and it muddles it all in Levi's mind, makes him doubt and question, want and refuse to want all at once. But he can't deny it, he knows as he closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep, that Erwin's pain is his pain now, and Erwin's joy is his joy, and Levi doesn't have a name for whatever that is, and he doesn't know if he needs one.

When he walks over to the man's apartment the following day, Levi has decided to address the matter head on, or as directly as he's able; to apologise, and try to form his incoherent thoughts into some form of an explanation, to dress up his feelings as words, the closest ones he can find if not the ones he needs. As he turns a corner, he sees a sleek black car parked outside the building; a man in a uniform of the Wehrmacht steps out just as Levi gets to the stairs and he stops to hold the door open for him.

"Thank you," the man says stiffly, following Levi into the stairwell; he's in his fifties, by Levi's careful estimate, with greying hair that seems to have been mousy to begin with and dark, wide lips that curve downward at the corners. He has that military posture that looks so natural on Erwin, but on someone so old seems exaggerated and false.

They start climbing together. Levi can hear the man's steady breathing and the sound of the heavy fall of his boots on the stones makes the hairs at the back of his head stand on end. When they come within view of the second floor landing, Levi sprints up the rest of the steps two at a time, reaching Erwin's door and placing three loud knocks on it, glancing behind himself to see the man walking towards him.

"It seems we have the same destination," he says, coming to stand behind Levi who can feel his breath catching in his throat.

“Looks like it,” he says back, pushing the words out just as the door in front of him flies open.

“Sturmbannführer Holtz,” the man behind Levi speaks as soon as Erwin’s stern eyes move from Levi to him. “I was hoping we could have a word.”

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- heavy angst

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Chapter ten for you all, I hope it's worth the three-week wait. I kind of like this one. The next deadline falls on 22 January.

[Here's](#) a Christmas present for my girlfriend I commissioned from the wonderful, amazing 35grams. My girlfriend loves it so much and so do I. Thank you again, so much!

More of the Erwin's POV scenes to follow when I find the time.

WARNINGS AT THE END

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi watches as Erwin regards the man at his door impassively for a moment, every second of which Levi feels as the hammering of his heart in his chest. The older man standing next to him has clasped his hands behind his back, a gesture which only manages to exaggerate his already rigid posture as he sways gently back and forth on his feet in a way that reminds Levi of Krieger when he was so drunk he would keep losing his balance.

“Of course, Herr Generalleutnant,” Erwin says calmly. “Do come in.”

The old man steps aside to let Levi enter first and he makes his way quickly into the apartment; his legs feel unsteady as he passes the threshold. He can see Erwin flinching restlessly as he does, like he’s noticing Levi’s presence only now when he walks out of the old man’s shadow. Levi’s mind is reeling with questions, but he doesn’t for a second wonder who the man is.

As soon as Osterhaus has turned to close the door behind himself, Erwin grabs a firm hold of Levi’s arm, pulling him painfully behind himself and further into the apartment. When Levi manages to turn to the man again, he has aimed a handgun between the eyes of the Generalleutnant, who doesn’t seem in the least surprised to find himself threatened like this. Instead he cracks open that wide, bruise-coloured mouth and lets out a wheezing cough-like laugh.

“Come now, Herr Sturmbannführer.” The title has a mocking emphasis on the old man's tongue. “You don’t honestly think it would improve your fortunes should I not make it out of here alive.”

Levi glances at Erwin who doesn't lower the gun, simply stands in front of him still as a statue. Somewhere in the back of his mind it occurs to Levi how strange it is, how they've come to this when during their first meeting Levi was in Osterhaus' place, the gun aimed between his eyes instead. Erwin's hand is still on his arm, keeping him in place and out of harm's way.

The old man speaks again but Levi doesn't understand the words; the Commander's language, though he speaks it roughly like a German, Levi guesses. They stare at each other for another tense moment before Erwin lowers the gun, his hand slowly easing its hold on Levi as his stance relaxes.

"That's better," Osterhaus states, walking past Erwin toward the sitting room. "Perhaps a cup of coffee while we talk."

Levi looks at Erwin who has turned to him, appearing serious. "Go and make the coffee," he says, and Levi can't quite tell who the man is trying to be, himself or Holtz; he's not sure Erwin himself knows.

"I don't know how," Levi tells him. "I've never made any before."

"Boil the water, take it off the heat, add a spoonful of coffee per cup, put it back on the heat, bring it close to a boil and pour it into the serving pot," Erwin explains hurriedly and quietly before walking into the sitting room, leaving Levi trying to grasp what he has just said.

On his way to the kitchen he sees Osterhaus who has taken a seat in Erwin's armchair while Erwin has sat down on the side of the sofa Levi has come to think of as his. Neither one of them speaks until Levi has left the room; their quiet voices don't quite reach Levi's ears as he goes through the cupboards, finding the coffee in a small tin-jar labelled with the word "mocha". He puts the water on the boil in a heat-worn copper kettle before searching for a set of coffee cups and a pot he has seen while cleaning the cupboards, smaller and more delicate than the tea-set he's familiar with. He measures in the coffee grinds with a small spoon as soon as the water has boiled, moving the kettle back on the stove for long enough to let it start bubbling again before pouring the coffee into the serving pot. Everything seems to take him longer than he'd like and he barely notices the fast pace of his steps as he carries the tray into the sitting room and lays it down on the table between the two men.

"This must be your little messenger," Osterhaus says, looking at Levi, his eyes full of mockery while Levi's narrow to a squint.

"You were getting to the reason for your visit," Erwin reminds the man and it seems to Levi he is using his words to turn Osterhaus' attention away from him, though the man has clearly been about to continue. Not knowing what else he should do, Levi pours the coffee into the two cups and sits down at the other end of the sofa.

"There's not a patient bone in your body, is there?" Osterhaus drawls, picking up his cup and leaning against the backrest of the armchair, throwing one of his legs over the other. "There's no rush."

Levi sees the second of strain on Erwin's face and grits his own teeth, though the expression disappears as quickly as it has entered, replaced by that serene impassiveness of the early days of their acquaintance. In the silence that fills the room, Levi wonders what he should do, whether he should keep sitting here or get to his tasks, to assume the role of Lukas Weller the housekeeper, until it occurs to him that the pretence is already useless. For the disguise to work he should never have entered the apartment, or rather he should never have joined Erwin on that mission in the Albertstadt.

Across from them Osterhaus takes a tentative sip from his cup before spitting it right back in. He nearly throws the dishes back onto the small table, knocking over the cup which spills its contents onto the polished wood; Levi's hands itch to clean it, but seeing the forced stillness of Erwin's features he feels reluctant to leave the room. The murky stain spreads to the edge and starts dripping onto the worn rug loudly enough to make Levi cringe.

"That's the worst damned coffee I've ever tasted in my life," Osterhaus snaps, wiping his mouth and turning again to Levi. "How can you make coffee that tastes of nothing and bitter as hell at the same time?"

"I'm still waiting," Erwin puts in quietly; there's an edge to his voice Levi hasn't heard before, and it makes him shudder.

Osterhaus turns to him impatiently, like angered by Erwin's refusal to play along with whatever scenario he has planned in his mind. "You're not in a position to dictate the terms of this negotiation," he barks sharply, reminding Levi of a dog baring its teeth.

"So this is a negotiation," Erwin responds steadily. "You want something from me then, and think you can offer something in return."

Osterhaus smiles, showing more aged teeth and gold fillings than Levi's seen in anyone's mouth in his life. "This will all go faster once we both agree that there isn't much I need to offer," he says smugly. "For someone in your situation my silence should be more than enough."

"Of course," Erwin agrees at once, to Levi's surprise. "And the price for said silence?"

Osterhaus laughs quietly. "Clearly you don't appreciate how much I'm enjoying myself," he tells the man. "I'm sure you know I despised you even before but by now the joy of having your neck under my heel has doubled its value. Trust me when I say I'm not about to let you ruin this moment."

Levi turns to look at Erwin, expecting to see an expression that reflects something of his own indignation, but the man merely smiles. "As you wish," he tells Osterhaus, whose mirth seems somewhat lessened by the ineffectiveness of his words. "I myself have only one request from you, but I'm sure we'll get to it later once you've named your terms."

"And we'll see how inclined I am to grant it," Osterhaus tells him before drawing a deep breath through his nose and exhaling, loudly and long. "I wanted to share my observations with you, if you don't mind."

“Not at all,” Erwin concedes, picking up the other cup of coffee before leaning back on the sofa.

“I made some inquiries about you, of course,” Osterhaus begins lazily, “and found a birth certificate for an Erwin Holtz, born in Vienna in 1910. No father mentioned, nothing further about the mother found anywhere after 1911. Strangely that was all the information I could find on an Erwin Holtz when I started to look more closely. No school records, no university attendance, no record of prior employment that would hold under closer examination.”

“I won’t make the mistake of being flattered by your interest,” Erwin says and Levi wonders how he can joke in a situation such as this. “And your conclusions?”

“It’s admirable how invisible you have managed to make yourself,” Osterhaus replies. “I guess it’s a skill, being unlikable enough not to draw too much attention to yourself but not so unlikable that people start to resent you.”

“That and a modest career,” Erwin admits, sipping at his coffee; Levi looks for signs of him finding it “bitter as hell”, but if he does he is not letting it show. “I realised very early on in this country nothing earns you a bullet between the eyes more quickly than success.”

“Ten years,” the old man says and whistles slowly. “At your age I’d say it’s the best part of a man’s life you’ve wasted here. I can’t even imagine how that feels, to spend so many years trying to achieve a goal only to be wiped out at the finish line.”

Only then does Erwin’s mask crack for a second that Levi catches only because he’s seen the expression before in the orchard of the cottage, that sadness and fear of regret. It’s the silence that’s more telling for Osterhaus, who takes a languid moment to pick his nose before speaking up again.

“Don’t worry,” he says, his voice dripping with a kind of victorious glee as he wipes his finger on the upholstery of the chair. “It doesn’t have to have all been for nothing. I can help you with that.”

Erwin keeps his silence, like waiting for something, or perhaps afraid that by speaking he might reveal too much. He keeps drinking his coffee, his thick brows furrowing as Osterhaus clears his throat.

“There is much we can do for each other,” the old man goes on, “though admittedly you’ll be the one doing more for me, but that is only because at present you stand to lose much more than I do. Namely your life, and the lives of your accomplices, of course. You’ll find I don’t face such a threat.”

“At present,” Erwin states as if to remind the man who doesn’t acknowledge the words. “I take it all the evidence of your crimes has been destroyed?”

“Of course,” Osterhaus says, “whereas your record could easily be called into question. Mandl and Schaumann?” The man shakes his head. “He had just managed to talk that actress into his bed after months of persuading her and suddenly he decides to leave the country and leave such a finely bred bitch behind? I think there’s a much likelier explanation.”

Levi remembers suddenly his first mission with Erwin, the signs of a party in the library and on Erwin himself, the pool of blood that had missed the rug, the suitcases they packed hastily before leaving the house in the middle of the night.

“Schaumann I miss,” Osterhaus goes on, sounding like he’s rambling. “As for Mandl I could almost thank you. They should have sent him to Dachau when they found out about that disgusting habit of his. That trial was a fucking farce.”

Erwin has fallen quiet again and Levi wonders whether his brain is busy at work, coming up with some way to get rid of Osterhaus without making matters worse. Or maybe he’s planning his own escape; they must have strategies in place for quick getaways in case of situations like these.

“Tell me,” Osterhaus says as Erwin lays his cup and saucer neatly back on the coffee table. “What did you do to that filthy little queer?”

“I slit his throat with my razor,” Erwin answers, his voice emotionless as Osterhaus barks out an excited laugh.

“Maybe you’re not so useless after all,” he says in a way of compliment, though Erwin clearly doesn’t take it as such; Levi can see his brows furrowing further. “I can see you’ve not been idle during your stay. Tell me, how do you find Germany?”

“I’ve come to like it very much,” Erwin says, sounding suddenly conversational. “Most of the people I’ve met are truly wonderful, and tremendously kind. It is a terrible shame that all the power has slipped into the hands of despicable individuals such as yourself. Even though it won’t last, of course.”

Osterhaus sighs. “No, it seems it won’t. I’ll venture those morsels of information you managed to squeeze from me have had something to do with it.”

“I’m glad to say they have,” Erwin replies, smiling briefly. “And that is why you are here alone.”

“Yes,” the old man concedes. “Though before we get any further with this little negotiation I’d like to remind you of how limited your options are. Either you accept my terms or you end up in front of a firing squad. Do you understand?”

“Perfectly,” Erwin responds calmly. “My life in your hands, as much as yours in mine.”

“I take it you’ve already come to a conclusion about the nature of my request.”

“Yes,” Erwin says. “You want to relocate and you need my help to do it. Should you attempt such a move yourself, you could hardly wish to avoid both capture by your countrymen and capture beyond the borders, or frontlines as they’ve now become.”

“You have no idea how good it feels not having to act like we’re winning this fucking war,” Osterhaus says. “For this I could almost like you. But you’re absolutely right, of course, you will get me as far away from the approaching shitstorm as possible.”

“*Suum cuique*,” Erwin says quietly, “but not in your case.”

“Of course not,” Osterhaus agrees, “nor in the case of some of my more affluent acquaintances.”

Levi sees Erwin’s jaw tightening, and he knows the older man’s statement has come as an unpleasant surprise.

“I don’t just want to escape,” Osterhaus explains. “Oh, no. I want to escape with a fortune big enough to buy me an island and with money left over to last me the rest of my days.”

“Ah,” Erwin voices, sounding to Levi like he has understood. “Which is what makes this a business venture.”

“For myself, at least,” Osterhaus explains. “I’m not the only one who’s desperate to make sure their past stays in the past. This war has made many people rich beyond belief, but I doubt *your* countrymen will appreciate how.”

“You can’t be serious,” Levi growls as he understands what the man is after. “You can’t honestly think anyone would help arseholes like you get away with the shit they’ve done.”

“Levi,” Erwin says, a tone of warning in his voice.

Osterhaus turns to look at Levi, his squinty eyes narrowing even further as they search for something in his features before he laughs. “It figures,” he states. “You know I always told them they would never get rid of all of you. I told them there is always one rat that’s too smart for the trap.”

Levi grits his teeth as Erwin speaks up. “So your acquaintances pay you a sizeable sum in exchange for which you’ll direct them to me, and I do my best to secure their exit from the Reich,” he clarifies. “I in turn get your vow of silence regarding what you know.”

“A vow which you can trust for as long as I’m on this side of the Atlantic,” Osterhaus adds. “Meanwhile I’ll let you continue your little game here – Lord knows we’ve lost this war whether you do or don’t. I’ll also do my best to keep you in Dresden for as long as I’m able, for our mutual benefit.”

“I see,” Erwin replies, frowning. “I assume you’ll leave the details regarding the actual relocation to me.”

“I know someone in Geneva,” Osterhaus explains. “That’s as far as I can get them unassisted.”

“Under the pretence of a holiday?” Erwin clears up, answering the Generalleutnant’s nod with the same. “That is the best course of action.”

“And you’ll help them across France and onto a ship heading west,” Osterhaus states. “Everyone wins.”

“Even those who don’t deserve to,” Erwin mutters. “Well, I don’t see the use in wasting time pretending like I have options besides accepting. Though I do have one request, as I mentioned before.”

“Which is?”

“That my agreement to take part in this arrangement will put an end to any further investigations into my life from your part,” Erwin says. “As far as you’re concerned I am the only operative in Dresden, or in what’s left of the Reich. Any accomplices I may or may not have will not be sought out, their identities will not be revealed and under no circumstances will they be brought into this – present company included.”

Osterhaus casts a glance at Levi and snorts. “And if I refuse?”

“In that case I see you have three options,” Erwin replies. “The Americans, the British or the Russians. Though in the end it will no doubt be a case of who gets to you first.”

Osterhaus' eyes flicker between the two of them for a moment before he sighs. “Fine,” he agrees lazily. “There’s no point in complicating this any further, in any case. I’ll let you keep the rest of your secrets.”

“Then we are in agreement,” Erwin states, getting to his feet. “I have to insist that you show yourself out.”

Osterhaus looks at Erwin for a moment before sneering mockingly and leaving his seat. “As you wish, Herr Sturmbannführer,” he says, laying that emphasis on the title again. “I will contact you soon.”

The moment Levi hears the door closing he jumps to his feet, barely noticing Erwin sinking back down onto the sofa as he rushes into the hallway to pull the man’s suitcases out of the closet before walking hurriedly into the bedroom. He pulls open the door of the wardrobe and starts throwing the man’s clothes into the bags, folding them sloppily on top of each other.

“You can contact Mike tonight, can’t you?” he asks Erwin, who is still sitting on the sofa, his face buried in his hands. “You’ll stay with us until you two can figure something out.”

“Levi—” Erwin starts, but Levi cuts in.

“I know,” he states, placing a pair of the man’s boots on top of a pile of trousers. “He probably has someone watching the house. But we can use the basements. The ones in this section are connected by doors, we’ll get all the way to the end of the street through them and if someone’s still following I can lose them on the way. I know I can.”

“Levi, stop it.”

“How long will it take for Mike to get here?” Levi goes on, having barely heard Erwin’s objections. “I know he’ll be able to get you out. To the base, or wherever. You can join the troops in France—”

“I’m not leaving,” Erwin states quietly, leaning his hands on his knees; Levi catches glimpses of the man looking at him with a frown as he dashes about the room. “Levi—”

“I know,” Levi says again, his voice growing hoarse. “You shouldn’t worry. We’ll be fine here. We’ve made it this far, haven’t we? How much shittier can things possibly get?”

“Did you not hear me?” Erwin asks, raising his voice as he gets to his feet again and walks into the bedroom. “I said I’m not leaving.”

“Yes, you are,” Levi insist, though the words make his insides twist painfully, like a hand has closed around his organs. “People know you hate that Nazi fuck, if you kill him now they’ll catch you for sure. And it’s not much less risky if I do it. If just one person sees me they can trace the whole thing back to you again.”

“I’m not going to kill Osterhaus,” Erwin tells him, frowning at Levi as he folds his shirts into the suitcase, but not interfering.

“I know,” Levi repeats. “It’s too risky. Which is why you have to leave.”

“No, Levi,” Erwin objects, marching over to the bed and snapping the suitcase shut. “I’m going to do exactly what he tells me to.”

Levi scoffs, pulling the other suitcase across the bed and starting to fill it with the contents of Erwin’s sock drawer until the man walks over to him, grabbing his wrists and forcing his eyes to meet his. Levi frowns at the severity of the man’s expression and for a moment he wonders what it is that has rattled the man so much that he can’t think clearly.

“Stop this now,” Erwin tells him sternly, bringing his face close to his. “I meant what I said, Levi. I’m going to stay in Dresden and do exactly what I promised Osterhaus I would.”

Erwin lets go of Levi’s wrists and pushes his hands angrily into his pockets to light a cigarette, which he smokes jerkily as Levi stares at him, brows furrowing as he tries to figure out what counterplan Erwin has devised. Is he going to deliver these people to the hands of the Allied forces in France? Is he going to tell someone in Geneva to start digging a collection of shallow graves in some remote woodland near the border? As he takes in the anger and disappointment on Erwin’s face, however, Levi begins to realise the man is telling him the truth.

“You’re joking,” he says quietly, wishing Erwin would nod and smile and agree but knowing that he won’t. “You can’t seriously be considering this.”

“I’m not,” Erwin tells him, exhaling a cloud of smoke. “It’s already decided.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” Levi snarls at the man, that calmness in his voice suddenly driving him to a rage. “Do you understand what he’s asking you to do? Do you understand what those people have done? To innocent people! To people like—”

“I know much better than you do what those people have done,” Erwin snaps at him, his voice quiet but sharp. “I hardly think I need a lecture from you on the use of forced labour in

this country. Or on anything else for that matter.”

Levi grits his teeth not to start shouting. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a fucking idiot,” he hisses instead. “And if you think you’re staying here to help me, don’t bother. I don’t need your help and I don’t want it. Not like this.”

“I’m not staying here to help you, Levi,” Erwin tells him, putting out the cigarette though he has barely smoked half of it.

“What the fuck are you doing then?” Levi asks, a note of desperation piercing through to his voice. “Why would you do something like—”

“Ten years of my life I have given up for this,” Erwin whispers, sounding angrier than Levi has ever heard him. “Everything my life could have been. Ten years of not seeing my family. Ten years of pretending to be someone I’m not. Not being able to attend my own father’s funeral.” He falls silent, running a hand through his hair in frustration. “Do you honestly think I consider this a good life, what I’ve had here for all these years? Do you really think this is the life I wanted for myself?”

“So you’re just doing it to see how this all ends?” Levi asks him back. “Helping fucking war criminals escape justice for your fucking peace of mind?” The man stays silent and Levi feels a disbelieving anger clawing at his chest. “I can’t believe you can be so fucking selfish.”

Erwin utters a laugh, hollow and bitter and joyless. “Are you saying you’d prefer it,” he starts, “if I told you I’m staying here to keep you safe? You’re the one who wanted our acquaintance to be strictly professional. Or had you forgotten so quickly?”

The words render Levi speechless as he suddenly remembers that intention he had before, to tell Erwin he was sorry for what he said, to tell him he doesn’t know what he feels but that he does, something strong and new and confusing, something he doesn’t have the words for. As he looks at the man now, at his expression that seems suddenly mocking, Levi seems to have forgotten why he wanted to let him know anything at all. Suddenly it seems as though everything he has thought he knows about Erwin – and what is that, exactly? A first name and a few overheard fragments of a language he can’t understand – has been replaced by things he never thought the man would be capable of.

“Go to hell,” he tells the man in a broken whisper, walking out of the room.

Levi can hear Erwin calling after him as he opens the door, but he doesn’t stop, doesn’t want to hear anything the man could possibly have to say for himself now, nor any form of apology he has in store – and he has plenty, Levi knows, Erwin is an expert when it comes to saying he’s sorry.

It seems as though every step he takes on his way back home across the city makes him forget another good thing about the man, all those softly spoken words and thoughtful questions, the favours he never expected Levi to return, the privacy he allowed Levi to keep. By the time he reaches his home, Levi has turned again to cursing the day they met, and hoping that fucking ridiculous plan to climb in through an open window had never crossed his mind.

“What’s wrong with you?” Farlan asks him as he throws himself on the sofa and presses the palms of his hands against his eyes. “And why are you back so early?”

“None of your fucking business,” Levi snaps at the other man, whose expression grows sour.

“Oh, how I wish it weren’t,” Farlan mutters, turning back to his writing as Levi falls sullenly silent.

Their dinner that night is a joyless occasion; Levi's anger and disappointment seem to poison the air in the room, making even Isabel quiet and glum. Farlan, however, seems irritated rather than disheartened by it judging by the daggers he stares at Levi and the incessant questions about Erwin that Levi doesn't acknowledge until the man grabs Levi's half-empty plate and throws it into the sink.

“I wasn't done with that!” Levi snaps at Farlan, who crosses his arms across his chest. “Do you think we can afford to waste food like this?!”

“I don't give a fuck about your fucking potatoes, Levi!” Farlan yells back at him as Isabel covers her ears with her hands. “What the fuck is wrong with you?! Why don't you talk to me about it?!”

“About what?” Levi asks, getting to his feet. “What makes you think everything about my life is your fucking business?! It's not *my* fault you're so fucking bored with your own!”

“Why won't you let yourself be happy, you fucking miserable piece of shit?!” Farlan shouts, his cheeks growing red with an angry blush. “Why won't you let other people make you happy?!”

“It's not that fucking simple!” Levi tells him before storming out of the room and the apartment.

He walks to the river, trying to find a way to crush all his frustration under the soles of his shoes. What right does Farlan have to come and tell him how he should live his life? What is so great about how the man has spent his that he gets to lecture others on the subject? Levi thinks of Erwin, thinks of all those bitter words they've said to each other, and he feels like shouting at the night sky, at God, at the murky waters of the Elbe, to scream out all that resentment and dissatisfaction.

Levi thinks about those people Erwin is now going to help, imagines the things they've done, and he feels betrayed: after everything they've done together, after everything Levi has told the man, Erwin still doesn't understand it – or worse yet doesn't care. Has he not seen what their lives have been reduced to? Has he not seen the state they're in, Farlan and Isabel as well? If he was going to help someone out, why not them? Levi doesn't want to believe it, could never have believed it before, that it's because there is nothing in it for him.

He sits by the river until he calms down, apologising to Isabel and Farlan when he returns. From then on he manages to hide the worst of it until the worst of it is over, thankful

nonetheless that Farlan drops his questions about Erwin even when Levi doesn't go to him the following week. It doesn't take long for Levi to remember the bleakness of his life before and why he had lost all interest in it. In the absence of anything better to do he cleans the apartment compulsively, hunting down every speck of dust as soon as his eyes catch it; it seems all the life he has left, some days even all that he has left of himself.

Without anything to do, Levi doesn't grow tired, lying awake in bed for half the night, thinking about Erwin and how big a part the man has begun to occupy in his life. It seems without Erwin there is nothing left, nothing meaningful, just empty tasks to fill the days that grow so tightly into each other that Levi can hardly tell them apart. He relives all their missions in his dreams, though every night they bear less and less resemblance to what really happened, until finally Erwin is alone, without Levi to be his mask, without Levi keeping watch, and when things go sour Levi wakes up with a jolt, drenched in sweat. In the end those worries won't leave him be even when he's awake; he wonders how dangerous it really is, what Osterhaus is demanding Erwin to do, whether the man's life is in constant danger, whether there is something Levi could do to prevent that.

After not seeing the man for a week and a half, Levi fills his Tuesday with whatever tasks he can think of to occupy his time and thoughts, joining Farlan and Isabel as they go shopping. He listens to the women standing in queues complaining about prices, gritting his teeth against snapping at Farlan when later that day he starts to do the same. They're running out of money again with Levi not working, and for that alone he knows he'll need to go back. He tries to picture the situation, himself knocking on Erwin's door, the man answering and looking down at Levi coldly before... What? Turning him away? Telling him there's laundry waiting in the bedroom? Levi wonders whether Erwin is the kind to hold a grudge, but there's simply too much he doesn't know about the man for him to know with any amount of certainty. Still, Levi wants to believe he isn't.

Levi wakes up early on Thursday, having made up his mind about going back to the man's apartment. What he hasn't decided, however, is what he will do once he gets there. Should he apologise, ask Erwin to explain, try to see the situation from his point of view, try to understand it somehow? Levi wonders whether he would be able to, but in the end it doesn't seem like his biggest concern. Erwin may not be at home, assuming Levi not to be coming over. He may not want to see Levi even if he is. He spends most of the day dusting the books in the bookshelf to keep his hands busy, stopping only when the task is done sometime past midday.

"There's a letter for you," Farlan tells Levi as he walks into the kitchen for a glass of water, sounding as surprised as Levi feels as he hands the envelope over.

Levi looks at the folded paper, the name L. Weller and his address written in large, clear letters on pencil. No name or address of a sender and Levi wonders whether Erwin too has grown to regret his words and Levi's continued absence. He rips open the top of the envelope, pulling out a single sheet of paper folded in half that begins: *Dearest*. Levi frowns at the pet name, but continues reading.

A gloom has come over my life now that we are not together. I think about you every day. Do you believe that? My life seems emptier, even though I'm always busy these days. I can't tell you where I am, they've forbidden putting anything about it in letters.

At night I think about you the most, or when I see one of those pretty nurses walking by. I remember how your body feels. It's like my hands have a memory of their own. I can feel your slick hole around my fingers. The boys at the Field Post Office are probably reading this and laughing, but I don't care. I dream about the taste of it on my tongue.

Levi's eyes jump to the bottom of the page as a nauseating realisation starts to dawn on him, confirmed by the underlined signature below the words *faithfully yours*. He never called the man by his first name but he knows it, feels the acrid taste of it in his mouth as he reads it before closing his fist around the letter, reducing it to a crumpled up ball and throwing it into the fire heating up the stove.

"Bad news?" Farlan asks him, looking curious and confused, and Levi shakes his head. "Who was it from? Erwin?"

"No," Levi tells the man, taking a deep breath. "It's nothing for you to worry about."

Farlan hums, sounding both irritated and knowing. "Your other friend, then," he says, making Levi shudder and keep quiet.

The letter is still on Levi's mind when he leaves the apartment, overshadowing even his nervousness about seeing Erwin again. What the hell was Krieger thinking, sending him a letter like that? Clearly he's lost whatever sense he had left, if he'd had any to begin with. Realising the man still thinks of what they had as some sort of a sordid love affair makes Levi sick to his stomach, bringing to his mind all those moments when Krieger would confess his love to him, lying on top of him, heavy, breathless and revolting.

So fully does the letter occupy Levi's mind that he doesn't notice he's being followed until he turns off the main road to a quiet alley where the footsteps falling behind him finally catch his attention. He glances quickly at the two men, wincing at the sight of their dark grey uniforms and fighting to keep his pace steady despite the nervousness he begins to feel.

He tries to decide what he should do; the men don't call out to him or seem in any way inclined to stop him and Levi wonders whether running now would only manage to make them take note of him. Perhaps they all just happen to be going in the same direction. Levi takes another look over his shoulder as he turns to a small residential street; the men are talking to each other, looking at him all the while but still not calling out to stop him, which decides the matter for Levi.

He keeps his earlier speed as he walks along the street, continuing toward the direction of Erwin's apartment; he thinks he can feel the men's eyes on his back and he thrusts his hands in his pockets, wondering whether he should be glad or not that he isn't carrying anything to defend himself with. It seems to him they're looking for an excuse to stop him, and Levi is determined not to give them one, though his frantic brain is sending signals for his feet to

pick up their pace and run. In the back of his mind Levi wonders whether his trick from before would work a second time, spotting the open window above the garden wall when he turns a corner and gets to the street leading up to Erwin's building, but the old cart he used to reach the top of the wall isn't there anymore, and Levi keeps walking with the two Gestapo men hard on his heels. They seem to be hurrying their steps now and Levi can hear their muffled voices as they argue among themselves, all the while shortening the distance between themselves and Levi.

"He's going into that building, look," one of the men says, his voice suddenly louder than it was before, as Levi starts walking up the stone steps to the main entrance of the building. "If you're going to do it, do it now."

"Excuse me," the other man calls out then, making Levi stop, his hand on the handle of the door. "You there. Stop."

"Me?" Levi asks, his heart beating madly in his chest as he turns around.

He gets a curt nod as a reply as the men walk up the steps; both of them are younger than he expected. For a few seconds Levi considers running, but realises his only choice would be to enter the building. He thinks about hurrying up the steps to Erwin's door with the Gestapo men following behind, but something stops him; if they really know about him, he can't have Erwin drawn into this, not with Osterhaus already breathing down his neck.

"Yes," the taller one of the men tells him; he still has a score of spots on his face. "We need to see your papers, please."

Levi swears in his mind but knows he has no choice now but to play along, drawing his brows into a confused frown as he pushes his hand into his pocket.

"What for?" he asks, trying to sound as polite as he can.

"We don't need to give a reason," the other man tells him, stepping closer to his colleague to peer down at the papers, pointing at something as the two whisper among themselves.

"Will this take long?" Levi asks now. "I'm going to be late for work."

The tall man glances at him quickly before placing the papers into his own pocket. "I'm afraid you need to come with us now, sir," he states matter-of-factly, reaching over to take Levi by the arm.

"Why?" Levi asks, stepping instinctively out of reach, his back hitting the door as both of the men walk forward.

"I told you," the other one tells him again, stepping forward and grasping a hold of Levi's elbow. "We don't need to explain anything to you."

"Am I being charged with something?" Levi goes on nonetheless; he wonders how someone innocent would behave in a situation like this, how they would feel, and hopes against hope that he's got the act right. "Have I done something wrong?"

“Just come quietly,” the taller one of the men says as his colleague starts walking Levi down the stairs. “We’re only taking you to headquarters for questioning.”

“To question me about what?” Levi insists, wondering whether it’s wise, wondering whether he’s overdoing it, wondering whether he should throw off the man’s arm and make a run for it; there’d be no pretending to be innocent after that.

“Stop asking,” the man holding Levi says and he obeys, letting the man lead him onto a busier street where people step aside to let them pass, pretending not to notice.

Levi walks along at the swift pace the Gestapo man is holding, fighting to breathe to keep his mind as clear as he’s able from the fear now gripping his body. His chest feels constricted, like a belt has been drawn tightly across it, keeping his lungs from expanding; he can feel a cold sweat pouring out from the back of his head; his fingers start to tingle and then grow numb as the palms of his hands start to perspire as well.

He glances at the man holding him, clinging to whatever pieces of information he can gather about his situation. The men are young, low-ranking; they don’t seem to know what they’re doing. As far as Levi can tell this is hardly how the Gestapo handle arrests. If they know who he is, if they know without question, would they not have come to his house, like he’s heard has happened to other people? Is it really protocol to walk people all the way across town for questioning? He thinks back over the situation, the other man’s words “If you’re going to do it, do it now” sounding again and again in his mind. Are they not sure then that Levi is a person of interest?

He should have gone to Erwin’s door; young and inexperienced idiots like these two would have shat their pants, being told off by an SS-officer. But then, they could be acting as well, lowering Levi’s guard well in time for the questioning to follow. Would people like them be capable of that? Were the Gestapo really that cunning? If they did know would Erwin have been able to talk his way out of it, of keeping a Jew in his hire for months without realising it? Levi doubts it, and it seems a large part of Erwin successfully living under a false identity is due to remaining unnoticed. Osterhaus took a closer look and found more than one thing to question in Erwin’s story, and others would find the same. They wouldn’t propose shady deals, though; an image of Erwin’s body slumping against a brick wall as a dozen bullets pierce his chest flashes across Levi’s mind, and suddenly he doesn’t regret his decision, though every step he takes seems to bring him closer to certain death.

Levi tries to focus again on what he knows as they continue on their way. No one is looking for Lukas Weller, nor Levi Ackerman; the Gestapo want Theodore Mertz, the Jew rat who humiliated them by disappearing right under their noses. A description of Theodore Mertz must exist in some file somewhere, a description Levi fits perfectly. Is that it? That other spy, Darlett, he said they were working on it, the problem of Theodore Mertz. Were they not able to fix it? Is that it? And this interrogation, what would they ask? What would they gain by asking him whether he is Theodore Mertz? He’d deny it of course, but who wouldn’t? Do the Gestapo use torture? Levi thinks it likely they do. They must beat confessions out of people – who the hell would confess to anything otherwise, knowing or even guessing what will happen?

They keep on walking, away from the old town, around Großer Garten. Levi tries to keep reminding himself that the men walking with him aren't sure of anything, that as long as he keeps denying whatever they accuse him of he has a chance, however small. So what if he fits the description of someone the Gestapo are looking for? Surely many people match many descriptions and they don't get arrested and sent away. Erwin could still come and get him out of this – maybe he heard it, the conversation on the stairs, it could have carried in through the open window. But there's a nagging in the back of Levi's mind; even if Erwin could help him who's to say he'd want to, after last time? He wouldn't risk his cover for Levi, he's not here to do that, not anymore, if he ever was in the first place.

They walk on toward the main railway station, coming finally to a large, six-storey building that stands across the street; the Gestapo headquarters. Men in uniform walk in and out and to Levi it seems like the people passing by speed up their steps in the shadow of the edifice. The man still holding him guides him up the steps and in through the door, sitting him down on a wooden bench near the entrance while his taller colleague disappears further inside the building. They wait like this for a while until the man returns and Levi is pulled onto his feet again and led down a hallway and into a small room with nothing in it but a table and two chairs in the middle.

“Take a seat,” the tall man tells him calmly before they take their leave. “Someone will be with you shortly.”

Levi manages a nod before the door closes; no sound of a key turning in the lock, and immediately Levi begins to wonder whether he could simply walk out – swift pace, calm as ever – until the voice of reason pierces through. Walk out of the Gestapo headquarters, trust his questionable luck to make it out alive? He looks around the room; the walls have a wood panelling and wallpaper, burgundy with a decorative pattern. It's not what he expected, but it doesn't make him feel better as he paces around the table, glancing every now and again at the door, knowing he should sit down and try to look calmer, more innocent, more like this is all just a big misunderstanding.

A lot of time seems to pass, though Levi loses sense of it as he walks from wall to wall in the small room, listening to the footsteps approaching the door and wondering every time whether this time someone will walk inside, but no one does. He starts to feel thirsty and for a moment he's almost glad for it, how the physical discomfort overshadows the anxiety raging in his mind, but after a while it loses its power and only manages to make him feel more nervous.

When he finally hears muffled voices outside the door, Levi rushes to sit down on the chair, trying to look like it's what he's been doing all along as the door flies open. The man who enters is wearing a uniform with the jacket removed, carrying a wad of folders in his hand; Levi estimates him to be in his forties from the grey hairs on his temples. He sits down on the chair across the table, opening the first of the folders after licking the tips of his thumb and index finger; his hands seem unusually large, the fingers bony and frail, the joints sticking out under his skin.

“An incident occurred on 19 April this year,” the man begins in a steady voice, “during which a Gestapo patrol stopped a man on a street near the Frauenkirche at around midday. Upon

questioning, the man fled on foot and remains on the run.” He takes a pause, looking at Levi and leaning his elbows against the table. “Do you know anything about this incident?”

Levi takes a moment to frown and shake his head. “No,” he says, keeping his voice steady despite the shudder that shoots down his spine. “I don’t know anything about it.”

The man looks at him for a moment of silence before continuing. “The officer present that day gave the following description of the assailant,” he continues as dispassionately as before, turning to read from the papers in front of him, “Height 160 centimetres, weight around 60 kilograms, other identifiers dark hair and dark eyes, slight of build. Does that remind you of anyone?”

Levi swallows arduously. “Now that you mention it,” he says, “it does sound a bit like me.”

“A bit,” the man repeats quietly, closing the file. “The man in question is suspected of being a Jew living under false papers here in Dresden.”

“I don’t know anything about any of that,” Levi hurries to state, trying to sound and look appropriately horrified.

“No?” the man asks him, and he shakes his head. “Does the name Theodore Mertz sound familiar to you?”

“No,” Levi says at once. “I’ve not heard that name before in my life.”

“When did you come to Dresden?” the man asks him suddenly, and Levi wonders whether he’s trying to force his thoughts off track.

“In 1929,” Levi replies quickly. “Sir, I wonder if I may ask... You don’t think I’m this Theodore Mertz person, do you?”

“It’s none of your business what I think,” he tells Levi irritably. “Where did you live before?”

“Berlin,” Levi answers. “On Thüringer Straße in Neukölln.”

“And where—”

The man’s question is interrupted by a knock on the door, followed by a young woman in a forest green jacket and dress sticking her head in.

“Excuse me, sir,” she says quietly. “A telephone call for you.”

The man looks annoyed as he says, “Tell them to wait. I’m busy.”

“I tried, sir, but they said it’s urgent,” she tells him, her eyes never straying to Levi. “It’s from Berlin.”

The man sucks on his teeth for a moment before picking up the pile of files and getting to his feet. He stops at the door and Levi can see him talking to the men who apprehended him, handing the papers over to the tall one and pulling out one slip, placing it on top of the pile.

“If he’s a match, have him sign this and take him to holding,” he says, already turning away when the young man speaks up.

“Sir,” he utters, sounding nervous. “How exactly are we supposed to know whether he’s a—”

“Jesus Christ,” the man mutters. “Check him. If he is one, have him sign this.”

Levi feels a cold wave of panic that makes the room blur before his eyes; he feels like picking up the chair and throwing it toward the men at the door and wielding its splintered remains as daggers as he makes his gory and glorious escape; he feels like jumping to his feet and fighting his way out of the room with his bare hands, like sinking his teeth into the throat of every Gestapo piece of shit standing between himself and the outside world. Instead he sits still as the men walk back into the room, closing the door behind themselves and all Levi can think is that it’s finally happening, the thing he’s been dreading for close to six years. The men linger by the door, huddled in a whispered argument before the taller one of them steps forward and clears his throat.

“Stand up, please,” he says; Levi can’t help but think how strange the courtesy sounds as he gets slowly on his feet. “And now if you could... err... remove your trousers, please. Or not remove them but rather pull them down. Please.”

Levi takes a step further from the table as his numb hands start struggling with the buttons on the front of his trousers; he looks down at his fingers and thinks it odd how they could have once been so deft when it came to this task, be it on his own slacks or someone else’s, when now they can’t seem to keep their hold for a second. The time it takes him to undo the fly, grab the waist of his pants and pull them down seems to take several minutes. As soon as the fabric pools at his ankles, Levi feels the urge to cover himself with his hands, but the thought of hearing the man in front of him ask him to move them is too terrible, and he leaves them at his sides instead.

As the man takes another step closer, Levi grits his teeth to fight against the feeling of complete nakedness he gets. Something about it reminds him of Krieger, but this is much worse, despite the fact Krieger has more knowledge about the most private parts of Levi’s body than anyone else in the world. He can feel himself shivering and wants to stop, but the intensity of the fear that is now taking hold of him makes his body unresponsive to reason. The man bends down to examine Levi, still keeping a good half a metre between them; Levi can’t look at his face but he hears the heavy exhales and the quiet groan that the man lets out.

“Could you...” he starts, glancing at Levi’s face before muttering, “Then again, never mind.”

The man peers down at him for another ten seconds before he straightens his posture again and walks over to his colleague, who’s still hovering by the door. Levi watches them huddle again into a quiet conversation as the man who has examined him scratches the back of his head and shrugs. The other man looks annoyed, pointing his hand toward Levi while the tall man starts to protest.

“Well I don’t know!” he says quietly, making the other man roll his eyes. “I’ve never seen one before. How am I supposed to know what it looks like?”

The other man pulls him closer to whisper something to him that makes him pull back, annoyed.

“Why do *I* have to do it again?” he asks, sounding angry. “If you know so much better why don’t *you* do it?”

The other man takes a glance at Levi, who’s still simply standing there, his trousers at his ankles and his stubby, flaccid cock peeking out of a thicket of dark, coarse hair. Levi can see the hesitation in his eyes that turns suddenly into determination as he marches forward and bends down to bring his face to the level of Levi’s crotch. Levi watches him squinting and tilting his head for a moment before straightening his back and walking across the room, giving his colleague a curt nod.

“You’re sure?” the taller man asks, glancing back at Levi as the man nods again. “You’re absolutely sure?”

The other man hesitates for a few seconds before uttering, “Yes. I’m fairly sure.”

“Fairly sure?!”

“I meant I’m sure,” he hurries to add. “I’m sure he is.”

The tall man looks at him for a few seconds before turning to Levi. “You can put your clothes back on now. Thank you,” he tells him as politely as before.

“Stop saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’,” his colleague tells him in a mumble as Levi pulls up his trousers, walking over to him again and taking him by the arm. “Move it.”

They lead him out of the room and further along the corridor, walking him down a flight of stairs into the basement floor of the building that has been fitted with small cells behind heavy metal doors; Levi can hear coughing and muffled voices carrying out into the hallway. He knows he should be protesting and telling his captors they’ve made a mistake, but his mouth seems paralyzed by fear and something even stronger than that: despair. When the man leading him pushes him forcibly into one of the cells, a bare room smaller in measure than Erwin’s bathroom and already housed by two other men, the realisation of the circumstance he’s in starts to dawn on Levi.

As the door closes behind him Levi is left hovering by it, his mind empty and his body numb. He looks at the two other men, both of whom are sitting on the concrete floor, paying no mind to Levi or each other. There’s a bucket in the corner that reeks of shit and the only coherent thought Levi seems able to form is the wish for his bowels not to start acting up now. He takes a seat by the door and tries to breathe, the beat of his heart growing into a loud humming in his ears as he looks at the men again. They both seem to be a few years older than him and the way they’re staring dully at the floor gives Levi the impression of utter resignation, of total submission to a fate that can no longer be altered. Slowly, like some part of his mind is still resisting, Levi turns to look at the floor as well.

As the hours crawl on in the stuffy room, questions start to form in Levi’s mind, sluggishly, like his brain is suddenly starting from nothing. They drip into his consciousness one by one,

like from a leaky faucet: Where do they take them, the Jews? East, camps, but what does that mean? Levi glances up at one of the two men who has an old bruise above his left eye. Do they even bother to move them anymore? Will they just shoot him on the spot, a standard issue execution behind the Gestapo headquarters? It's impossible to evaluate how likely or unlikely it is. And what would they do with his body afterward? Throw it in some shallow mass grave somewhere a few miles outside the city?

For the first time it seems Levi has a chance to think about Farlan and Isabel, and he wonders how they will react when he doesn't come back home. Will he become another thing Isabel never talks about? Will Farlan lose his courage again and stay indoors all day? Frau Gernhardt might feed Isabel for a while – but they need him, they need Levi to get them through this alive. Would either of them think to contact Erwin? Would he help them, hide them somewhere, get them out of the country, out of Europe if need be? Levi thinks about the argument they had, about Osterhaus giving Erwin the choice between helping him and facing a firing squad. Why did Levi call him selfish? It seems so stupid now. Of course Erwin has his own reasons for staying, more personal than bringing the war to an end as quickly as possible. How could anyone do what he does without being personally involved?

Suddenly Levi remembers a conversation they had several months ago, during which Levi made it very clear he was only helping Erwin to help himself, that he was doing it all for himself. And how true that was, how true it has been from the beginning. He's barely considered anyone else for months and he has the nerve to call Erwin selfish for wanting to continue to do his part? The acceptance of his own hypocrisy leaves an acrid taste in Levi's mouth. He wonders what his parting words were to all of the people in his life. 'Go to hell', that's what he told Erwin; as for Farlan and Isabel, he can't even remember.

Before late Levi grows tired, catching what he estimates are a few hours of sleep on the concrete floor the coldness of which seems to seep into his core, making him shiver. He tries to wrap his own arms around himself to keep warm and fall back to sleep, finally giving up when one of the men starts urinating into the bucket in the corner, filling the cell with the pungent stench of his piss. Levi holds his for hours though it makes no sense, finally giving up and emptying his bladder, trying to aim the stream into the bucket without looking directly at it. He starts to feel incredibly hungry, but doesn't jump at the chance to eat when they are finally brought their meals; stodgy cold porridge and a piece of dry bread with a glass of water that tastes metallic and bitter.

"What are you here for?" one of the men suddenly asks Levi as he forces down the last of the food before drinking the water eagerly.

"I don't know," Levi replies. "What about you?"

"You don't really think it matters, do you?" the man with the bruise across his face interrupts; even in this one question his words sound refined and upper-class. "You'll only find peace of mind when you stop looking for that spark of reason in their madness."

They all fall quiet again, staring at the floor, and Levi can feel his breakfast shifting uneasily in his stomach. It makes him nervous; whatever happens he doesn't want to vomit into that bucket. For an uneasy quarter of an hour it feels to Levi like the most important thing in the world, not to have to bend over in the corner and bring his face near other people's waste. His

body aches and he feels feverish, like his skin has suddenly become too sensitive for the weight of his clothes. He wonders if the men know what's going to happen to them, whether they'll be taken away and if so, where to. He wants to ask and doesn't want to at the same time, thinking not knowing must be worse than knowing, and fearing it isn't.

There's something numbing about the slow passing of time, something paralysing about the silence that lingers in the cell. It seems to lock Levi's jaw and by midday he starts to wonder whether even those few words he exchanged with his cellmates ever actually happened or whether he just imagined them. He starts to feel like his body and mind are separate, like one has no power over the other; in the endless dimness of the room Levi feels nothing, thinks nothing, like his life isn't his own anymore, like he has ceased to exist already. Someone comes in, a soldier, and takes away the man with the bruise on his face; he doesn't return.

When they come for the two of them still left Levi doesn't struggle – what would be the point? There's no escaping this now.

They are marched in a line of about twenty men – single file, no need for cuffs or binds of any kind – onto a courtyard within the buildings. There are armed men, Gestapo and SS, and they are made to wait; the day is hot, one of the hottest they've had all summer, and soon they're all drenched in sweat. Someone asks to move into the shade of the building; his request is denied. Levi starts to feel thirsty again – it feels a lifetime ago that he had that glass of water – and he starts scratching the back of his head almost compulsively as beads of sweat start pouring out of his scalp and running down under his shirt. No one talks. They can hear the traffic on the street beyond the building, a soft buzz of chatter, a quiet hum of engines.

Four men enter into the square; Levi recognises the men who apprehended him, one tall, dark and gangly, the other stocky and blond. They march quickly to them, ordering them to form a line again; the prisoners comply quickly with the efficiency of soldiers. Levi feels his breath growing shallow and fast as a sudden pang of fear drowns his mind. For a few seconds it all ceases to feel real, the worn stones of the courtyard under his feet, the sun scorching his skin from above. He feels like gasping for air, like falling to his knees and begging someone or something to end this.

“A wrong move will be your last move,” an officer of the SS tells them, holding a gun for emphasis. “Walk on.”

They're on the move, being led by another SS man under an archway and through the building on their right. They emerge onto a quieter street but walk quickly over to a busier one, crossing it toward the railway station. Levi looks around himself at the people passing by; women in dresses, children wearing hats to keep off the sun, boys in shorts with braces, girls in skirts and knee-high socks. The children look at them until their mothers notice and pull them along by their arms.

They walk past the main entrance, past the platforms meant for ordinary passengers and ordinary trains, onto a freight platform further along the tracks. There's no train and they're made to wait again, but the small building by the rail casts a shadow over the area where they stand. There are others already waiting, brought here from somewhere else, and several dozen more arrive, mostly men but women too, dressed in prison clothes, a distant look in

their eyes. Their lines start to break, there are hushed conversations in which Levi takes no part. He feels dizzy, his fingers have grown numb again and the sides of his face tingle, all pins and needles as the train arrives, causing an abrupt, bizarre silence.

Someone orders them into formations again as two tables and two chairs are brought out, occupied swiftly by men in SS uniforms. They start lining up and giving their names to the officers who record them all meticulously in lists. Levi can't take his eyes off the train, the large doors through which they are all made to enter, walking up ramps like cattle. The shorter the line in front of him grows, the more panting Levi's breathing turns until he starts to feel like he's barely breathing at all. There's a moment of panic-laden clarity when he realises it doesn't matter if the war ends, it doesn't matter how long it takes, they're going to kill them all, just like they promised, they're going to find every single one of them and by the time they're done no one will remember they ever even existed. Levi feels sick, that instinct for survival is tearing at his mind, his body grows heavy and full of purpose with no release; he looks at the guns in the hands of the SS men and wonders which is submission, to be shot right here on the platform or to get onto the train. His gaze sweeps the crowd, his hands clench into fists as he looks for anything, any escape, any weapon. The line in front of him has disappeared, there are only a few men between him and the table.

And then Levi sees him.

Darlett is sitting behind the table, dressed in his uniform and holding a pen, marking down name after name as the men give them, casting them barely a glance as they pass him on their way on board the train. His expression is disinterested and irritated, like someone selling tickets for the tram, bored by the tedious routine of his work. He looks up for a moment but doesn't see Levi, his eyes passing over the crowd, like he's wondering how much longer he'll need to be here. Levi shudders as the person in front of him steps up to the table, wondering what he should do, wondering whether anything will make a difference. Has Erwin sent him? Could he have? In the second it takes Darlett to send the man in front of Levi onto the train, he makes his decision.

He steps up to the table and falls on his knees, clasping his hands together like he's seen Farlan do during his moments of despair. Darlett jumps back in his chair, looking angry and repulsed while loud yells start pouring out behind Levi, though to him they seem distant and inconsequential. Someone tells him to get up, hitting him across the head, but Levi grabs the edge of the table, refusing to move.

“Please,” he gasps, looking straight at Darlett. “Please, there's been a mistake, I haven't done anything! I was on my way to work when these men stopped me. Please, I swear I'm not who they say I am, I've never even heard of that person, I'm not a Jew, I'm not, I promise—”

“Get up you piece of shit!” someone shouts behind him, grabbing his arm and pulling at it, but Levi won't let go of the table.

“Please, I swear, I'm innocent!” he begs for his life. “I work for Sturmabführer Holtz, I work for Erwin Holtz! Please, I'm not a Jew, I swear, I'm not, I'm—”

“Get up you filthy son of a—”

“Wait.”

The hand lets go of his arm as Darlett leans closer.

“Did you say you work for Erwin Holtz?”

“Yes!” Levi exclaims. “Yes, I work for Sturmbannführer Holtz. I'm his housekeeper. Please.” He looks again at Darlett whose acting is better than Levi would have thought. “Please, I haven't done anything, I don't know why I'm here. I was on my way to work when those men stopped me—”

“Which men?” Darlett asks him, lifting his hand as someone behind Levi tries to speak.

“Those two,” Levi says, pointing at the men who apprehended him; they walk over on Darlett's orders, looking noticeably nervous.

“Did you arrest this man?” Darlett asks them and they share a look before nodding.

“He's Theodore Mertz,” the stocky blond one explains. “He's a Jew who's been living under—”

“I am not!” Levi interrupts the man, turning again to Darlett. “My name is Lukas Weller. I work for Sturmbannführer Holtz, I was outside his apartment when—”

“Yes, alright, I heard that already,” Darlett cuts him short, turning again to the two men. “Why do you suspect him of being this Theodore Mertz person?”

The men look at each other, hesitating for a moment before one of them utters, “He fits the description, sir.”

“He fits the description,” Darlett repeats quietly. “Fits what description, exactly? Short man with dark hair?”

The men in front of him fall quiet again and Darlett swears under his breath.

“Who supervised this arrest?”

“Kriminalkommissar Wahler—”

Darlett swears again. “The next time you see him you can tell him if he ever fucks up like this again I'll teach him the meaning of the word 'interrogation'. Alright?” he whispers and the men hurry to nod.

“Yes, Herr Hauptsturmführer,” the taller one says, straightening his posture as Darlett turns to glance at Levi.

“You did conduct an interrogation, did you not?” he asks the men, who share another look.

“Well,” the tall man starts, “Kriminalkommissar Wahler did, but he had a phone call—”

“Do you have any idea,” Darlett interrupts him in a dangerously quiet voice, “how much the fucking incompetence of your department is costing this country every year? Does Wahler have any idea?” He pauses to take a deep breath. “Did you two idiots at least check if he matches the whole description?”

The man in front of him blushes. “Do you mean the—”

“Yes,” Darlett says, pushing the words out through gritted teeth and rolling his eyes, “and while you answer please know that if God hadn't granted me twice the amount of patience he does ordinary men, both of you would be on board that train right now.”

The blush disappears from the man's face as he nudges at his colleague, who doesn't seem capable of getting a word out for the first few seconds. “Well,” he finally manages, “we weren't exactly sure about—”

“For fuck's sake!” Darlett shouts, standing up and walking around the table, looking down at Levi. “You, get up, and you two get me his papers and the file on Theodore Mertz. You have exactly three minutes before I give you both a new permanent address. Is that understood?”

“Yes, Herr Hauptsturmführer,” the taller of the men says, already turning to follow his colleague out of the platform.

“You,” Darlett snaps at Levi who has clambered to his feet. “In here.”

He leads Levi into a small office furnished with another desk and a telephone sitting atop it. Darlett leaves the door ajar behind them, glancing out the small window before walking across the room and stopping in front of Levi.

“As much as it pains me,” he mutters under his breath, “we had best make this look authentic, don't you think?”

Levi grits his teeth and nods before pulling down his trousers again, cringing as Darlett bends down to examine him; it seems to Levi like the man is slowly counting to ten in his mind.

“That ought to do it,” he says after heaving a weary sigh, glancing back as if to make sure someone has seen them through the gap between the door and its frame. He walks over to the desk and sits on the edge, picking up the receiver and dialling a number before giving the name Erwin Holtz with a polite please at the end.

Levi listens to Darlett's half of the conversation which he seems to carry out loudly enough for the people passing outside to hear. He's still talking when the two men enter, never giving them a glance as they hand over the papers he requested. He flips through them, pressing the receiver to his ear with his shoulder as his eyes scan the pages.

“You know how it is,” he says, lowering his voice and glancing toward the door. “These Gestapo fucks don't know how to do their jobs.” He stops to utter a laugh at something Erwin says. “Yes, exactly. But don't worry, I'll send your precious cheap labour over as soon as things get sorted here.” Another pause. “Of course *I* take your word for it, Holtz, but you can't expect... Yes, exactly. I'll send him over soon.”

He disconnects the call and dials another number, waiting again for a moment. "Riehl? It's Müller," he finally starts. "Check something for me. Can you find a Theodore Mertz in your records?"

It takes the man a few more of these calls before he pulls a slip of paper from the desk drawer and writes something down on it as he puts down the receiver and calls the two men into the office, handing the file back over to them; the taller one hugs it against himself like a shield.

"Well," Darlett begins, getting slowly to his feet, tapping Levi's false papers against his hand. "Where should I start? Oh, right. The order for both of you to go out into the city right now and get yourselves a mirror."

"A mirror, sir?"

"Yes," the man goes on, "so both of you fucking idiots can take a good hard look at yourselves and learn the difference between a Jew's cock and a normal one. And secondly I want to congratulate you two for being the most useless pieces of shits in that turd of a department of yours." He turns to pick up the sheet of paper from his desk. "Theodore Mertz, real name Gluckstein, Yaakov Israel. Apprehended in Leipzig two months ago and transporter to Bergen-Belsen where he died of typhus shortly after arrival."

The men look at each other before turning their eyes on the floor. "Our apologies, Herr Hauptsturmführer," the stocky blond one mutters as Darlett bangs his fist against the desk.

"Where the fuck do they keep dragging up useless bastards like you?!" he shouts, his face turning red. "From some fucking halfwit colony in Poland?! Don't you fucking know how to use a God damned TELEPHONE?!"

The young men stay quiet, shifting restlessly on their feet; Levi can hear the doors of the train being closed outside. Darlett turns away, drawing a few deep breaths before facing the men again, but before he has a chance to speak, another man in SS uniform knocks on the open door and sticks his head into the room.

"Train's leaving, Herr Hauptsturmführer," he says, nodding to Levi. "What about him?"

"Tell them it's fine," he replies much more calmly, though he glares at the two young men all the while. "Mistaken identity."

The man nods and takes his leave as Darlett picks up Levi's papers and hands them to him. "We are very sorry for the inconvenience," he says in a dull monotone. "Say hello to Holtz for me, and tell him he owes me one."

Levi nods mutely as he puts the false papers back into his pocket before walking outside, stepping onto the platform just as the train starts moving. He doesn't think to hurry even when the men who apprehended him pass him in front of the station on their way back to the Gestapo headquarters without so much as giving him a second glance. He can feel the warmth of the sun on his skin, pleasant now as the afternoon starts to turn into evening. He walks toward the river, barely seeing or hearing anything as he makes his way to the

Augustus Bridge and lets his feet start moving him away from it rather than across the Elbe and toward his home.

He can feel the deep frown on his face when he finally knocks on Erwin's door, and the intertwining agitation and numbness that battle for control over his body, making his muscles tense up and his senses dull. When the man answers, Levi walks in without saying a word, without looking up at Erwin's face even when he closes the door and crouches down to meet Levi's eyes.

“Are you alright?” he asks, his voice strained. “Levi. Did they hurt you?”

Levi's mouth won't form words, his tongue feels swollen and paralysed. He keeps his eyes on Erwin's boots even as he calls his name again, not knowing the answers to his questions, not finding the words. There is something about all this that bothers him and he tries to grasp it, the only thing he's sure of right now, taking Erwin's hand in his and leading him into the bedroom.

“Levi,” Erwin calls him, gentle and confused. “Levi, what are you...”

Levi stops by the bed, reaching out his hands to grab the hem of Erwin's shirt, pulling it out from under the waist of his uniform trousers. His fingers find the end of the man's belt and he teases open the clasp, noting dully how much more deft his fingers have suddenly grown as he starts easing the buttons through their holes.

“Levi,” Erwin says again. “Levi, I don't think this is the right time—”

Levi pulls down Erwin's trousers, glad to see his body has not begun to respond, and turns away toward the wardrobe, rummaging through the clothes the man has folded neatly enough back onto their shelves. He finds what he's been looking for though they're not where he left them: the pair of slacks Erwin was wearing the day they spent by the river. He passes them over to the man without a word before walking into the bathroom to draw himself a bath, undressing quickly and sitting down in the tub while the water is still running. He lets the water come up past his elbows before turning off the tap, drawing his knees close to his chest and wrapping his arms around them.

He can hear Erwin entering the room, the heavy fall of his boots turned into a soft shuffle of his bare feet. He doesn't turn to look but catches the man's shape from the corner of his eye as he walks over to the cupboard to find something, a piece of cloth and a tin box. He draws up a small stool behind Levi.

“May I?” he asks; Levi nods mutely.

He hears Erwin place the tin box on the floor before his hand falls softly and warmly on Levi's shoulder. He tilts Levi's head to the side, running his fingers into Levi's hair, following them with a fine-toothed comb. Levi feels something catch in his throat at this, a fear he didn't realise among the rest but which makes him shudder now that he does. He leans into Erwin's hand for a moment before allowing the man to continue, to go through every strand of hair.

Slowly Levi's body relaxes, his legs straighten out in the warm water which he changes as it starts to get cool, like following some instinct buried within the memory of his muscles. He glances up at Erwin as the man lays down the comb, noting his reddened cheeks and the gleam of sweat on his face, but still saying nothing. Erwin smiles at him – a calming smile like the ones people give to frightened children – as he picks up a small towel and dips it into the water. Levi can smell that scent of lavender, stronger than it has ever been, and he glances behind himself at the thick lather Erwin is rubbing onto the towel from a bar of soap; some sort of black market stuff, the ones issued through ration cards haven't given out foam like that in years.

Levi cocks his head to the side, letting Erwin run the towel across his shoulders and neck, over his clavicles and down to his chest. He leans forward to expose his back, not moving until Erwin has rubbed the skin red. He adds soap and washes under Levi's arms, scrubbing at the soft tufts of black hair before handing the cloth wordlessly to Levi who finishes cleaning the parts of his body he'd rather not have Erwin touch. He doesn't turn around to see if Erwin is watching; it wouldn't bother him if he did.

He dries himself with a soft, clean towel before walking into the bedroom and climbing between the sheets; they smell of lavender too, like he does, and of Erwin. The man follows him into the room after draining the tub, looking like he is about to take a seat at the edge of the bed before Levi finally speaks.

“Could you close the window?” he asks, his voice coming out hoarse and dry.

“Of course,” Erwin says, walking over to it and shutting it. “Is there anything else you need?”

“Farlan and Isabel,” Levi mutters, pressing his face harder against the pillow. “They'll be worried about me if–”

“I'll go and tell them you're fine,” Erwin promises quietly. “Try to get some sleep.”

Levi nods, drawing the covers over his shoulder and sighing, a frown still knitting his brows. The scents of the bed are disappearing too soon as Levi breathes them in; by the time he hears the door closing behind Erwin there is hardly anything left of them. He turns over to his back and stares at the faint glow of the streetlights on the ceiling, too restless to close his eyes and too tired to do anything but stay still. He doesn't think and hardly feels, imagining instead that it's Erwin's side of the bed he's lying on, that his body has fallen against the mattress, that his warmth still lingers in the sheets. Levi forces his body to feel heavier, to sink into the bed, Erwin's bed, like he is as strong as Erwin, like Erwin's strength is on him.

He's still awake when the man returns, somewhere in that hazy place where sleep and reality cross. Levi can hear him shuffling in the dark, going through his cupboard in the dim light carrying in through the window.

“Were they alright?” Levi asks him quietly; he can hear the man give a start.

“They're fine,” Erwin assures him in a voice that tells Levi he's smiling again calmingly like before. “They're a bit shaken up, that's all.”

Levi grunts, unable to focus any more on that now. “What are you doing?” he asks Erwin now; he can hear the man has returned to his earlier task.

“I’m getting some sheets and things for the sofa,” Erwin explains.

“Don’t,” Levi says, turning on his side and listening to the man hesitating for a minute before undressing. He can feel his weight as he lies down on the bed behind him and knowing there is nothing more they need to say, nothing he needs to explain about this, Levi lets himself drift off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- anxiety

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Here is chapter 11. Chapter 12 will be posted on February 5th.

Also a massive thank you to [adnerdiora](#) for their amazing fanart on Dresden. I am seriously overwhelmed with all of your comments and now this. I honestly don't know what to say.

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi's mind starts registering sounds long before his eyes open; the hushed clanging of the tram in the distance, the chirping of birds outside, the soft scraping and splashing as Erwin shaves his face by the washstand. He's trying to be as quiet as possible, Levi can tell, and something about that thoughtfulness makes him press his face more firmly into the pillow and draw his knees closer to his chest. He doesn't want this moment to end, doesn't want to remember what brought him here, that fear and paralysis from before that seems to have eased during the night, though Levi can still sense the cold dread of it just beneath the surface.

He opens his eyes a fraction, catching the movement of the plain white curtain as it sways in the morning breeze. The window is open; Levi remembers hazily how Erwin woke him in the middle of the night, asking for permission to unlatch it again. The man had begun to sweat – Levi could tell from the heat of the bed and the clamminess of the sheets. He can smell it faintly on them now, though the fresh air has dispelled most of the stuffiness of the room. As he draws a breath and closes his eyes again, Levi wonders why he doesn't mind it, lying in someone else's dirty sheets.

He turns onto his back almost reluctantly, stretching out his arms and legs, squinting up at Erwin who is drying his face on a towel. Their eyes meet in the mirror above the basin and Erwin smiles, his usual response to the frown Levi wears.

"I hope I didn't wake you," he says gently. "I was trying to be quiet. How are you feeling?"

Levi shakes his head as he sits up in the bed, realising his own nakedness only when the covers fall off his shoulders and chest. There's something about how the sheets feel under his bare arse that makes Levi feel embarrassed, though when he climbed between them the night before he barely noticed he wasn't wearing anything.

“I’m fine,” he replies, his voice sounding low and rough even to his own ears as he pulls the covers around himself. “And you didn’t wake me.”

“Good,” Erwin states, hanging the towel to dry over a rack built into the washstand. “I guess you’ll want some breakfast. It must be a while since you last ate.”

Levi remembers the cold porridge he had in the cell and shudders. “What time is it?”

“Just past six,” Erwin tells him, walking over to the cupboard and lifting out a bundle of fabrics. “I brought you some clean clothes from your apartment last night. I thought you wouldn’t like to wear the ones from before.”

Levi feels a roughness in his throat, the same he remembers from the night before, when Erwin started combing through his hair. “Thank you,” he manages to say as the man lays the clothes on the bed.

“I could bring you some breakfast in here if you—”

Levi clicks his tongue. “Stop fussing. I said I’m fine,” he repeats, frowning at the concern in Erwin’s expression. “See? I’m talking and everything.”

The man utters a soft laugh. “I think I’d feel better if you were swearing,” he remarks, making Levi scoff.

“Keep fretting like that and I will,” he tells the man who laughs again.

“Alright,” he says, lifting his hands up defensively as he starts backing out of the room. “I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.”

“Just stop it already,” Levi tells him again, trying to sound stern but not being able to keep the smile off his face. “This is your last warning.”

“I best not try my luck then,” Erwin replies before leaving the room and closing the door behind himself.

Levi gets to his feet and stretches his body again; his muscles feel stiff from the tension of the previous day, but other than that he feels better than he thought he would. He walks quickly into the bathroom, using the small towel and the bar of soap to wash off the sweat from his body. As he runs the cloth over his chest, Levi thinks to wonder whether Erwin usually sleeps like this, completely in the nude instead of in the undershirt and underwear he wore the previous night. Levi thinks it was polite of him, despite the separate covers they had; after all, the bed isn’t overly wide, and Erwin’s weight made Levi roll repeatedly onto his side of the mattress.

Levi stops the cloth over his abdomen, feeling reluctant to even look at his own body below that, and rinses it before hanging it to dry. He dresses quickly into the clothes Erwin has brought him – a grey shirt and brown slacks, clean socks and underwear and his work boots – before walking through the apartment and into the kitchen where Erwin has set the table with a loaf of bread and cheese and marmalade and butter, a bowl of strawberries and a pot of hot

tea, which he carries to the table after Levi has taken a seat, drawing his knee between his chest and the edge of the table.

“Are you in a hurry to get home?” Erwin asks him, sitting down across from him. “I have some mutton we could have for lunch, if you’d like.”

Levi thinks about the question, and thinks about Farlan and Isabel by themselves in the apartment and he knows he should say yes and that he’ll be leaving right after breakfast. He frowns at that strange urge he feels, the same one he felt the night before when he reached the bridge, the one that made him change his course and come to Erwin’s instead of going home to them.

“Sure,” he decides, glancing at Erwin’s smiling face and feeling a sting of guilt. “I can stay for lunch.”

“Great,” the man says, and they fall quiet as Levi starts buttering a slice of bread, until Erwin breaks the silence. “I understand if you don’t want to talk about—”

“Not yet,” Levi interrupts him, feeling a surge of nauseating terror and focusing instantly on pouring the tea and the deep amber colour of it as it descends into his cup.

“Of course,” Erwin responds in that soothing tone from the previous night. “Take as long as you need.”

Levi nods wordlessly, splashing a drop of milk into his tea and stirring. “Where do you get that soap?” he asks the man, bringing to his mind that scent of lavender as he takes a bite out of his bread, savouring the salty taste of the butter on his tongue.

“Black market,” Erwin explains, confirming Levi’s assumption. “Though it seems it’s becoming rarer by the day there as well. I could try and find some for you, if you’d like.”

“Even with what you’re paying me I couldn’t afford it,” Levi tells him, sipping at his tea.

“A gift then,” Erwin suggests, but Levi shakes his head.

“I don’t like gifts,” he explains. “They make me uncomfortable.”

“I see,” Erwin says, pouring his own tea now. “May I ask why that is?”

Levi shrugs. “I don’t know what to do with them,” he tells the man through a mouthful of cheese. “I don’t like people giving me things. It makes me suspicious.”

“Suspicious of what?” Erwin asks now, uttering a laugh. “Of their motives? Of what they’ll want in exchange?”

Levi shrugs again. “Not many things in this world that come for free,” he mutters. “Besides, I’m mistrustful by nature. Call it a character flaw. Or under these circumstances call it common sense.”

“Huh,” Erwin voices, sounding reflective. “Obviously I cannot blame you for that, but I find it a touch surprising to hear you say it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Erwin muses, taking a sip of his tea. “I suppose I just never saw much of that side of you. You were so quick to take up on that offer to assist with the operation I had rather marked you down as reckless and trustful, perhaps even too much so.”

Levi looks up at Erwin, realising he’s right, all this time he must have seemed like the sort of person who goes along with almost anything. He could hardly have picked anything more dangerous than this, especially considering his vow to remain as unnoticed as he possibly could. That was Erwin’s plan as well, Levi recognises, and it makes him wonder whether the recklessness is something they bring out in each other.

“You’re an exception to the rule,” Levi lets the man know, stuffing the rest of the bread into his mouth and reaching for another slice. “Right place at the right time and all that.”

“Well,” Erwin muses, taking a large bite of his slice of bread and waiting until he’s finished eating before continuing, “I’m glad you feel you can trust me, in any case. I was afraid that had changed.”

Levi’s hands slow down in their task of spreading marmalade onto his second slice of bread as he remembers their argument from two weeks ago as vividly as if it had happened the day before. He can feel shame glowing on his cheeks as he glances up at Erwin. Those things he said to the man feel so stupid now when he allows himself to admit that if it weren’t for his blunder during the mission in the Albertstadt, the man wouldn’t be in this situation now. Maybe it was the man hitting him that made Levi want to blame the whole thing on him rather than accept his own role in what Erwin is now forced to do – or maybe Levi was just too ashamed to acknowledge it.

“I know you said it isn’t necessary,” Erwin starts, frowning now, “and I know you probably don’t like me bringing it up. But please, for my peace of mind if not for any other reason, let me apologise for hitting you then. I can scarcely express how sorry I am.”

Levi glances up again before turning his eyes back on his cup of tea. If he has been waiting to hear it, he hasn’t been aware of it, and at the time when he told Erwin an apology was unnecessary he really did mean it, or at least thought he did. And still there’s something about those words when said out loud that eases a strain in Levi’s chest, even when he always assumed that simply knowing how Erwin felt about it would be enough for him.

“It’s fine,” Levi says, looking up and meeting Erwin’s gaze. “I thought I forgave you even then but now I really have so you don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Erwin replies, sounding relieved; he returns to his breakfast, stopping abruptly when Levi breaks the silence again.

“And I’m sorry,” he starts; the words sound strange and all the ones he’s still holding in seem to press on his chest. “I’m sorry about calling you selfish. I mean, all this shit with Osterhaus

is my fault, if I hadn't—"

"I told you, you shouldn't blame yourself for—"

"If you don't let me finish now, I'll never get this shit out so will you..." Levi says, drawing a deep breath and looking up at Erwin again. "Will you just let me say it for once?"

Erwin looks at him and though he's not smiling, those faint wrinkles at the corners of his eyes seem suddenly deeper. "I'm sorry for interrupting," he says. "Please, continue."

Levi takes a moment to gather his thoughts, stirring the tea in his cup slowly. "If I hadn't fucked up during that mission, you wouldn't be dealing with Osterhaus and all this shit right now," he starts again. "I'm sorry for putting you in this position, and I'm sorry for calling you a shitty person for trying to make the best of a fucking terrible situation. Back when we met I told you you didn't know what the fuck you were talking about, you know, about people like me and the truth is I don't know what you've been through or what your life has been like so who the fuck am I to judge the things you do and why you do them."

Erwin listens to the litany calmly, his large hands resting on the table. "I won't deny," he says, "that had you not made that mistake during the mission Osterhaus would not now be in a position to use that knowledge against me. However, the decision to involve you in the mission was mine and considering it was your first, I remain of the opinion that you performed your part admirably. I do forgive you that mistake whole-heartedly and I also forgive you for what you said. I can't blame you for thinking me selfish. After all, it's not an unfounded estimation."

They both start eating their breakfast again in silence, but something is still rattling around Levi's mind, something left unsaid that won't let him be. He looks at Erwin scooping up a bowlful of halved strawberries and eating them with a spoon; there's a distant look in the man's eyes, like he too is troubled by some unfinished thought. Levi fights to find the source for his own unease, cringing internally when he does but deciding this is the time for it; he won't be likely to speak this much again for a while.

"And I'm sorry," Levi starts, just like he did before, like he needs that extra word to be able to say the rest, "about what I said to you, about only seeing you as the person whose home I clean. I didn't mean that."

Erwin smiles. "I'm happy to hear it. I act—"

"I guess I just think it would be easier," Levi goes on and some part of him is wondering what's making him run his mouth like this, "if I did see you like that. I mean... It never even started like that, but then... Friends isn't really it, either, and I'm just so fucking lousy with people and I don't really—"

"Levi?" Erwin interrupts him gently; that smile on his face makes Levi feel stupid. "Whether we're working or not, I enjoy your company and I hope you enjoy mine. It doesn't need to be any more complicated than that."

"Right," Levi states, turning back to his breakfast, feeling finally content with the silence.

“Another cup of tea in the sitting room?” Erwin asks Levi after he’s finished his strawberries.

Levi nods, getting to work brewing more tea while Erwin lays their cups on a tray and carries it out of the kitchen. Levi follows him after a moment, taking his usual seat on the sofa opposite of Erwin.

“So you got the coffee stain off the rug,” Levi notes, remembering that swine Osterhaus knocking his cup over. “What did you use? Ammonia and alcohol?”

“Exactly,” Erwin replies. “I had to ask one of my neighbours for advice.”

Levi scoffs. “Well, you have other talents,” he says, making Erwin utter a laugh. “I was kind of expecting it would still be here when I came back.”

“I wasn’t sure you would,” Erwin tells him, pouring the tea, “so I had to take matters into my own hands.”

“I was coming back, you know,” Levi wants to let the man know without thinking further. “I was right at the door when—”

The thought forces its way through, making Levi stop and shudder. In a second he remembers all of it, the long walk to the Gestapo headquarters, the interrogation, the stench of piss in the cell, the bruise above the other man’s eye. ‘You’ll only find peace,’ he said, ‘when you stop looking for that spark of reason in their madness.’ Levi thinks of the way he fell on his knees in front of Darlett – he has bruises now to remind him – and begged for his life, and that dull sense of relief that he couldn’t quite feel under the general numbness.

“Levi?” Erwin asks quietly, and something about the softness with which the man says his name brings Levi back to the present. “Are you alright?”

Levi frowns. “I’m fine,” he says again, not sure he means it. “I think.”

Across from him Erwin lays his cup down on the coffee table, circling it and placing the armchair in front of Levi, sitting down and leaning his elbows against his knees.

“The good thing is they won’t be looking for you anymore,” he tells Levi in a low, hushed voice. “Theodore Mertz is dead and buried, and no one has any reason to be suspicious of Lukas Weller.”

Levi nods slowly, meeting Erwin’s eyes for a few seconds before turning his gaze away. “Fucking stupid,” he mutters under his breath, pressing the palms of his hands against his closed lids. “I’m fine, you know. I’m—”

“You had quite a fright,” Erwin says, reaching out his hand and placing it on Levi’s knee; it feels warm through the fabric of Levi’s trousers, grounding somehow, and calming. “I’d be very surprised if you weren’t a bit rattled by it.”

“I was,” Levi replies, running a hand through his hair nervously, “and it made sense at the time, but why do I still feel like shit about it now? It’s just... fucking stupid.”

“I don’t think it’s stupid,” Erwin tells him. “I think it means you take staying alive very seriously, which is a very good thing indeed.”

Levi scoffs. “That fucking survival instinct,” he whispers. “I guess there’s no way out of it.”

“I truly hope there isn’t,” Erwin says quietly.

They fall quiet for a long moment during which Erwin’s hand on Levi’s knee seems to grow heavier and larger, like that simple touch is growing in importance. Levi meets Erwin’s gaze steadily, staring into the man’s eyes like he’s looking for something, though he’s not sure for what. There’s nothing familiar to him about the expression on Erwin’s face, nothing he has seen on anyone else’s at least; there’s a kind of wistfulness that Levi doesn’t understand, and it makes him break the connection.

“What happened?” Erwin asks him, making Levi sigh.

“I was stopped outside the building,” he begins to recount, “by these two fucking idiot Gestapo fucks. They took me to the headquarters, this other piece of shit Nazi came in and asked a few questions. He had to go, though – a phone call – so he told the idiots from before to... check me.”

“And did they?”

Levi nods. “They didn’t know what they fuck they were looking for,” he explains, running his hand through his hair again, scoffing. “I guess I should be grateful for that at least.”

Erwin nods. “Then what happened?” he asks now, like knowing it’s all helping somehow, getting it out.

“They took me to a cell,” Levi continues. “I was in there for a long time. The whole place reeked of piss and shit.” The memory makes Levi shudder. “They took us out to wait for the train and wrote our names on lists. I saw Darlett, told him there’d been a mistake and that I worked for you.”

“He saw you at the headquarters earlier and telephoned me,” Erwin explains, drawing back his hand; the spot where it rested on Levi’s leg feels suddenly cold.

“He said to tell you you owe him one,” Levi says, making Erwin utter a dry laugh.

“Yes,” he muses. “As far as I know Darlett isn’t one to do things out of the goodness of his heart. No doubt he saw some advantage for him to seize in helping you.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “I don’t like him,” he says somewhat unnecessarily, making Erwin laugh again, warmly and heartily this time.

“I had noticed that,” he tells Levi, smiling as Levi reaches for his cup of tea, emptying it before sighing deeply; something seems to let go of him with it. “He’s not an entirely terrible person, and he is on our side in this fight, which makes him—”

“Tolerable,” Levi finishes for the man who laughs again; the sound makes the corners of Levi’s mouth twitch upward.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” Erwin commends him, picking up his own cup and emptying it. “You’ve quite the way with words, don’t you?”

Levi laughs as well. “Oh, yes,” he tells the man, thinking about his former struggle to form even one comprehensible sentence. “I’m a real wordsmith.”

Erwin sighs. “I don’t know why you always find my assessments of you so ridiculous,” he says. “You should know for the most part I really do mean what I say.”

“For the most part?” Levi asks, grinning at the exasperated look on Erwin’s face.

“Clearly I’ve read you wrong in some aspects,” he clarifies, leaning back in his chair. “Take the recklessness thing, for instance.”

“I have been reckless about this, though,” Levi tells him, “so it’s not as if you’ve read me completely wrong.”

“Well,” Erwin muses, “be that as it may I meant what I said. You may not always be very fine-spoken about it but I admire your way of getting your point across.”

“It takes a lot of pretending,” Levi says quietly, “living like this. I guess I’m just glad to have found someone I don’t have to tiptoe around all the fucking time.”

“I know very well what you mean,” Erwin replies, “though I suppose for myself it’s rather the opposite. Holtz is... Somewhat more coarse in his manner than I prefer to be.”

Levi nods and they fall quiet. As he glances at Erwin it occurs to Levi again how similar they are, how much the same their circumstances though they’ve come here through such different walks of life. It has been a while since he’s realised it and it seems strange to him suddenly how comforting the thought has grown, how much it can mean in the end, having someone who understands you. He realises that Erwin feels the same, like he said the night of the party, that Levi’s presence makes his life easier for him to bear. Levi likes that thought, that he can help Erwin by merely spending time in his presence while there still remain ways in which they can’t get close.

They spend another hour like this, talking and not talking, enjoying the silence as much as the conversation, until Levi starts working as the state of the apartment begins to grate on his nerves. When the light outside starts to finally turn to cast slanted rays through the sitting room windows, they cook the mutton for their lunch with fried potatoes and green beans; Levi packs up the rest to take home to Farlan and Isabel. At the door Erwin hands him a wad of Reichsmarks which Levi places quickly into his pocket.

“I thought you might be running out,” Erwin says, “with the break and everything.”

Levi agrees in a grunt. “Farlan’s started complaining already,” he tells the man, smiling again as he laughs.

“Like your very own housewife,” he jokes, and Levi can’t help but agree, though he finds the thought slightly disturbing.

“Never thought I’d have one of those, but here we are,” he admits. “Not that he’s wrong. We do need the money.”

“Of course,” Erwin states. “I’m glad to be able to help with that.”

“Yes, yes,” Levi mutters. “Always glad to help. I know.”

Erwin laughs again, a sound that follows Levi all the way to his apartment where Farlan and Isabel run to greet him as soon as they hear the key in the lock, or so it seems to Levi. Isabel is the first to close the gap between them, running over to wrap her arms around him so tightly Levi can barely breathe. She’s followed quickly by Farlan who does the same, letting go much faster than Isabel.

“How was it?” he asks as soon as Isabel has detached herself from Levi. “What happened? Erwin didn’t explain it, he just said the Gestapo questioned you.”

Levi nods tiredly, walking into the kitchen after Farlan, sitting down at the table at his request as he pours him a cup of tea

“They had me in a cell all night,” Levi tells him. “I got as far as the platform before someone Erwin knows got me out.”

“Were you scared, big brother?” Isabel asks him, making Farlan snort.

“That’s such a stupid question, Isabel. Of course he was scared,” he states matter-of-factly as he sits down opposite of Levi. “So you stayed at Erwin’s?”

Levi nods again. “It was closer and I was tired,” he explains, knowing himself it’s barely half the truth. Farlan seems happy enough with it, and Levi doesn’t elaborate. “I brought some lunch, and money.”

Isabel, who has been eyeing the brown paper package on the table curiously starts tugging on the strings before the words are even out of Levi’s mouth only to have the parcel yanked from her hands by Farlan.

“Plates!” he exclaims as the girl rolls her eyes. “There’s no reason we can’t at least pretend to be civilised, even in our state.”

Levi remembers suddenly his first meeting with Erwin, how the man said something very similar to him then, and he utters a quiet laugh. Something about the lively bickering makes him feel better as well.

“I don’t want to be civilised,” Isabel insists, leaning her elbows against the table, “I want to be not hungry.”

“It will take me two minutes to get this on plates,” Farlan tells her.

“And it will take you fifteen minutes to do all the dishes,” she reminds him. “How does it not make more sense for us to just eat it with our hands straight from the papers?”

Farlan looks at Levi like demanding his input, receiving only a shrug.

“I’d say it’s cleaner with a fork,” Levi starts, “but then how much cleaner is a properly cleaned fork than properly washed hands?”

“Honestly!” Farlan huffs, turning to the cupboard to get out two plates which he places on the table. “It’s like explaining life to a pair of feral children!”

“What do you expect?” Isabel asks him. “Not everyone was raised in a palace like you.”

“I was hardly raised in a palace,” Farlan replies, scoffing, “but at least we had tablecloths, and fancy china for special occasions.”

“Like what?” Isabel goes on, grinning. “Your wedding?”

Farlan makes a face at her as Levi laughs into his cup of tea.

“Do you want any? Should I get you a plate?” Farlan asks him suddenly and he frowns.

“I already ate.”

“I know,” the man acknowledges, “but I thought maybe you’re still hungry, or have a craving. There’s still plenty left if you—”

Levi shakes his head. “You go ahead,” he tells the two.

“Are you sure?” Farlan asks, waiting for his nod before portioning the food onto the plates. “Do you want anything else? More tea? I think I may have some tinned peaches stashed away somewhere if you—”

“Stop fussing,” Levi orders the man gently. “I don’t need anything. I’m fine.”

His assurances seem to fall on deaf ears, however; after lunch Farlan and Isabel sit him down on the sofa and bring him everything he needs and many things he doesn’t, telling jokes and funny stories to make him feel better. Levi loves them for it, though he feels he hardly needs it now, and he starts to already feel that restlessness from staying still for too long. By the time Farlan joins him in bed after doing the dishes, Levi is already trying to think of something to do the following day.

“What is it?” Farlan asks him quietly when Levi gets out of bed. “What do you need?”

“For fuck’s sake,” Levi huffs, scratching at the back of his head. “I need to take a piss. Are you going to come and hold my cock for me as well?”

The other man laughs and shakes his head. “I’d rather not, if you can manage by yourself,” he tells Levi before drawing the covers closer to his chin; he’s already asleep by the time Levi gets back.

Levi's wish to have more to do is granted a few days later – though not in a way he would have preferred – when Isabel comes home in the evening and her usual search for U-Boats in a stolen newspaper gets constantly interrupted by her ferociously scratching her head, a habit Farlan picks up by the following morning. Levi himself is spared until Tuesday, by which time he has already boiled all their sheets and spent hours going through both Farlan and Isabel's hair with a louse comb. He borrows an envelope from Farlan to send a message to Erwin, entrusting Isabel with its delivery to the post office a few streets over.

"He looked through my hair after that night, you know," Levi tells Farlan, shivering in a bathtub full of lukewarm water as the man pulls at his hair with the comb.

"Erwin did?" Farlan asks him and Levi nods. "That was very kind of him."

"He is," Levi mutters, shuddering as Farlan squishes another bug between his fingers. "Very kind."

"Yes," the other man hums. "You two have that in common."

Levi snorts. "I think he's in a better position to show it," he states, making Farlan agree in a grunt.

"Maybe," he says, "but I think it's sweet, in any case."

"How can you still be such a romantic?" Levi asks him. "At a time like this?"

Behind him Farlan laughs. "It could be the end of the world and I'd still believe in love, darling," he tells Levi, waving the comb in a dramatic arch. "For other people, at least."

Levi scoffs. "It would suit you much better than me," he says. "I don't know what to do with it."

"Let him teach you then," the other man replies, "and try not to be such a fusspot. It's very unattractive in a man."

"You're one to talk," Levi counters, turning to look over his shoulder. "And besides, he's even worse than you are."

Farlan tuts him, tilting his head forward. "Well just..." he starts, stopping to sigh. "Let someone else take care of you for a change. Alright? Just let him do that if he wants to. Men like him want to feel needed, you know."

"Where did you learn all this shit?" Levi asks him, laughing. "*Das Blatt der Hausfrau*?"

Farlan laughs as well. "My mother did read it religiously," he says, "and I have to admit, I did glance at it myself on occasion."

"It makes me nervous," Levi admits after a long silence, drawing his knees close to his chest as the water starts to cool even further.

“Men reading women’s magazines?” Farlan asks him now, tutting again as he shakes his head.

“This thing with Erwin,” Levi clarifies, listening to the other man’s hesitation before he answers.

“I know.”

After Farlan has covered his head with vinegar and wrapped it in a towel, he leaves Levi to finish cleaning himself, wishing him goodbye through the door on his way out to do the shopping. Levi fills the tub again, trying in vain to get the tap to spout out any amount of water that’s warmer than his body. He sits down sullenly, scratching at his scalp through the towel, waiting to get used to the stench of vinegar now hovering all around him. His fingers travel under his arm to ease an itch, forcing him to get out of the tub to peer at the dark hair through the mirror.

Suddenly he feels as though every bit of hair on his body is crawling with tiny bugs, like they’ve laid their eggs even on the soft down on his thighs. He takes the comb Farlan has left behind, brushing through his armpits with the help of the stained mirror on the wall. When he’s sure he won’t find anything Levi turns his attention on the coarse hair between his legs, bending his neck painfully to see further with little luck.

After scratching at his head through the towel again Levi makes a decision, grabbing the shaving soap and Erwin’s razor from the top of the cupboard where he keeps them. He spreads the foam down between his thighs and up between his cheeks, lifting his foot on the edge of the bathtub to better access the spots. He spends twenty minutes running the razor across his skin, clearing the hair away by the tufts, finally rinsing the area and returning to the empty apartment, closing the curtains before looking at himself in the tall mirror in the bedroom, frowning at the sight.

His cock hangs limp and lonely, sticking out of his body like an enlarged thumb, like it barely belongs there anymore. Levi tries running his hand down to it, but the feeling is all wrong too, the smoothness of his skin feels child-like and embarrassing. He crosses his arms over his chest, staring at the bareness of it all, the visibility, and sighs, wondering already how long it will take for it all to grow back.

It takes them two weeks to get rid of the lice, during which Levi soaks all their clothes and linens in hot water three times, and the whole apartment starts to stink of vinegar. By the end of it all Isabel’s hair is nearly as short as Farlan’s, a fact she doesn’t seem to mind despite the abundance of cringing and grimacing she did while he was cutting it. Levi and Farlan have both managed to keep theirs as they were and though Levi has never considered himself a vain person, he’s glad about it nonetheless, especially whenever he feels the utter baldness under his clothes.

When he’s finally able to return to Erwin’s apartment, he feels his hands itching to get started on the cleaning; no doubt the work has piled up while he’s been gone. He hops up the stone steps two at a time, greeting Erwin with a quick smile when he answers the door.

“Have you cleaned while I’ve been gone?” he asks the man who scratches his neck, looking sheepish. “Didn’t think so.”

“A quick cup of tea before you start?” Erwin asks him back before getting it ready, carrying the tray into the sitting room where Levi is waiting. “I guess I wasn’t as thorough as I thought. With your hair, I mean,” he says to Levi as he sits down, making Levi shake his head.

“It wasn’t that,” Levi explains. “I think Isabel got them from some neighbour’s brat. Though a stray dog is just as likely.”

“She has a way with animals,” Erwin says, smiling fondly. “I noticed it on the farm. I suppose it’s due to her background.”

Levi nods, sipping at his tea impatiently; there are dust balls under the secretaire that keep catching his eye every time he looks up. “She should be living somewhere like that,” he replies. “Sometimes I think about sending her away, to live in the country. I think in a lot of ways it would be safer, but I don’t know any place where she could go.”

Erwin nods. “Travelling is getting more and more difficult,” he says, “even with the right papers. I doubt even Osterhaus’ acquaintances will have an easy time of it, even with the bribes they can afford.”

“So you don’t think you could help them? Farlan and Isabel?” Levi asks, regretting it as soon as he sees the pity in Erwin’s eyes.

“I really wish I could. You know I do,” he replies, “but I can’t think of any place to move them to that would be safer than here. I know I talked of the base before, during our discussion of the trip, but I only meant it as a last resort. I honestly believe them to be better off here with you, at least for the time being.”

Levi nods again. “I thought as much,” he says, drinking his tea. “I’d probably lose my mind anyway, not knowing how they’re doing.”

“I think relocating Isabel would be difficult but manageable, should the situation demand it,” Erwin tells him, “but getting you and Farlan out of the Reich at this point would be all but impossible. You’re both service-aged and your leaving would be viewed with the highest level of suspicion. I don’t think any amount of paperwork would get you across the border.”

“And smuggling has its own risks,” Levi states. “Get caught and you’re killed on the spot, most likely.”

“Should things get more dire there are further possibilities for hiding within the city,” Erwin reminds him. “You know my door is always open – to all of you.”

“I know,” Levi says, looking up at Erwin. “I just wish that–”

His words are interrupted by a loud knock on the door that makes them both give a start. Levi suddenly remembers vividly Osterhaus’ purplish mouth as it drew into that smug smile and

he feels a shudder run down his spine.

“Take the tray into the kitchen,” Erwin tells him in a hushed voice and Levi nods, picking it up and carrying it out of the room, not being able to resist glancing around the corner into the hallway as Erwin answers the door.

Lilian flits in, straight-backed in a pair of heels and a sundress. The weather is still more than warm enough for it; Levi noticed it himself while walking through the city, sweating even in the light clothes he is wearing. She takes off her sunglasses and turns to Erwin – with the heels she’s almost as tall as he is – wrapping her arms around his neck and pressing a quick kiss on his lips. Levi can see Erwin glancing quickly at him before grabbing Lilian’s arms and forcing them down.

“What are you doing here?” he asks her quietly, making her pout.

“Agata took the children to the zoo so I thought I’d pay you a visit,” she explains quickly. “What? Is this not a pleasant surprise?”

Levi watches Erwin sigh and pinch the bridge of his nose before giving her a quick, strained smile. “I didn’t think you would, after last time,” he tells her softly.

“Oh, but it was just a silly little argument,” Lilian responds, laughing in a way that sounds a touch nervous to Levi. “I’ve put it behind me. It’s all in the past. Please, don’t remind me of it anymore.”

Erwin hesitates for a moment before closing the door. “Come on in then.”

“Thank you, Herr Sturmbannführer,” she chirps, walking past Erwin into the sitting room, casting a glance at him over her shoulder before taking a seat on Levi’s spot on the sofa. “You should offer me something to drink. I’m parched.”

“Weller,” Erwin calls out to Levi, and just like that he is Holtz; Levi feels a shiver running down his spine. “Get us a jug of water and–”

On the sofa Lilian gasps softly. “Water, Erwin?” she asks him, voice full of indignation Levi guesses is more than a little exaggerated. “I thought you promised you wouldn’t act like such a pinchpenny around me. You know how distasteful I find it.”

Erwin takes another moment to heave a sigh before turning back to Levi. “There’s a bottle of champagne behind the buckets in the pantry,” he says in that odd, rough tone Levi doesn’t recognise.

“Much better,” Lilian tells him languidly; Levi can see her taking off her shoes and stretching out her legs on the sofa before he walks into the kitchen again.

He does his best to ignore them as he brings them the bottle and two glasses, focusing on his tasks thereon. While he stays in the kitchen it’s relatively easy; he can hear them talking, but quietly, like background noise to the sound of his duster and the clinking of the dishes in the sink. As he cleans, Levi is reminded again of this flaw in Erwin’s character, his lack of

attention to basic cleanliness, a fault Levi feels himself balancing out quite well as things stand. It's a new thought, that they create a balance, and he gives it a moment's consideration until Lilian's laughter breaks through and he realises if anyone creates a harmonious pair in this house, it's not him and Erwin but Erwin and her.

He sees it all the more clearly when he walks back to the sitting room and finds them lounging on the sofa, her feet on his lap and his hands on them while she sips at her champagne. Levi tries not to look at them while he dusts the bookshelf and the secretaire and the little cupboard in the corner. Just from that one glance he gave the pair, Levi could see the two wouldn't look out of place in one of those films Farlan likes, the ones that get pictures of them in magazines with the leading lady in a ball gown and diamonds and her man in a bowtie and dress shoes. When he walks into the bathroom to get water for scrubbing the floors, Levi stops to look at himself in the mirror, wondering what fate made him so short and strange-looking; next to Erwin he looks like some poxy overgrown brat with wrinkles around his eyes and a look on his face like he's about to start shaking his fist at anyone close enough to see it.

"I was meaning to ask you," Lilian tells Erwin in her singsong voice as Levi kneels down on the floor to start rubbing at the boot prints on the floorboards. "How are things with you and Osterhaus now? I heard a rumour you two had reconciled."

Erwin breathes out heavily, putting his glass of champagne down on the coffee table; he's barely touched it. "I don't see how it concerns you," he tells her sourly, "but we have come to an understanding. Of sorts, anyway."

"How marvellous," Lilian replies in a lazy drawl. "In that case I can invite him to my party as well."

Erwin groans. "A party?" he huffs, sounding genuinely annoyed. "Didn't you just have one?"

"Yes, and you didn't show up, which forces me to throw another one," she scolds him, sitting up on the sofa, still keeping her legs in his lap. "Come on, Erwin. Everyone loves my parties. It makes all the rest of this dreariness so much easier to bear."

"We're at war, Lilian," Erwin tells her exasperatedly. "Things are supposed to be dreary. We're all supposed to cut back on things now."

"Au contraire," she says with a smile. "*Some of us* are supposed to cut back on things so that those who *matter* don't have to."

"Tell me you don't mean that."

"Oh, Erwin," she laughs. "You know I find this lower-middleclass background of yours absolutely charming – and something of an aphrodisiac on occasion – but you have to remember there are different rules for people like us. There are things that are expected of us, and those expectations have to be met."

"And your parties are the way to do that?" Erwin asks her, sounding surlier by the second.

“Absolutely,” she tells him, leaning in to his ear. “You’ve enjoyed them before, haven’t you? Or rather...” She takes a pause to run her hand under the collar of his shirt. “You’ve enjoyed what happens after the parties. Isn’t that right?”

Levi looks at the two from the corner of his eye as Erwin grabs Lilian’s wrist and throws her hand back gently but firmly, though still much more forcefully than she’s used to, judging by her surprised and dismayed expression.

“Not now,” he tells her quietly; the words sound like a growl.

“Erwin,” she protests, looking insulted. “He’s only the help.”

“I don’t care,” Erwin snaps. “This isn’t about him, Lilian.”

“What is it then?” she demands, folding her arms across her chest. “I thought I made it perfectly clear that I won’t have you treat me like this, Erwin. You know I will not have it.”

He scoffs, pinching the bridge of his nose again. “Do you know there’s nothing less appealing than a grown woman who still acts like a spoiled little brat?” he says, sounding tired. “Why don’t you go home and learn to act your age? And I mean your real age, Lilian.”

Levi can’t help lifting his gaze from the floor to look at her as she stares at Erwin, her lips pursed together so tightly they look like a wound on her face. The silence that falls is hateful and unwavering, and it seems as soon as Levi’s hands have forgotten their task, his mind has started to run wild, wondering what happened between the two to make Erwin so unkind. When he sees Lilian glancing at him, Levi starts scrubbing at the floor again ferociously, catching her standing up from the corner of his eyes. She puts her shoes on slowly and deliberately before walking out, slamming the door behind herself without uttering a word, leaving behind an awkward silence that both Levi and Erwin seem hesitant to break. When Levi glances at the man, the look in his eyes seems distant until he covers them with his hands, letting out a heavy sigh.

“I let it get too far,” Erwin mutters, and if he didn’t look up at Levi then, he would have assumed the man was talking to himself.

Levi nods, but doesn’t know what to say. He looks at Erwin, all himself now, and wonders if there’s anyone else in Erwin’s life now who sees this, who sees as much of him as Levi does, all this guilt and unease and distress. He thinks about all the parts of himself he hides from Farlan and Isabel – and had that not been one of the reasons why he came to Erwin that night, now that he thinks about it, to keep them from seeing him like he was then? He remembers Farlan’s words: “Let him take care of you for a change”, and looks at Erwin, wondering whether he needs it, wondering whether it would be fair to burden the man like that.

Erwin is still sitting on the sofa when Levi starts to head out, leaning his elbow against the armrest and smoking one cigarette after another, like looking for some kind of comfort that he can’t find. Levi feels like reaching out his hand, like brushing his fingers through the man’s hair, like letting him lean onto his chest and breathe for a while, but something stops him; they don’t touch each other, not like that, not out of the blue in the light of day. Levi wonders whether he should stay, but Erwin breaks the stillness of the moment by standing up.

“I only really have money this time,” he says. “I’m sorry for being so unprepared.”

Levi shakes his head. “It’s fine,” he replies. “I told you, money or food, so the money’s fine.”

“Right,” Erwin mutters, handing Levi a small stack of notes. “I hope things can get back to normal now.”

“Me too,” Levi admits. “No more lice, in any case.”

Erwin utters a cough-like laugh. “Yes,” he says as they walk to the door. “No more lice.”

“Are you going to be—”

“I’ll be fine, Levi,” Erwin tells him, smiling tiredly. “Please, don’t worry about me.”

Levi nods but breaks the promise before he’s even reached the Augustus bridge. He thinks about what Farlan said, about men like Erwin wanting to feel needed, and he understands what Farlan meant; he has felt that himself, like the only reason it makes sense to get out of bed is to make sure Farlan and Isabel have enough to eat, and to keep them from worrying about him. He can see why Erwin would want that, to help in such a straightforward way after going on with this cloak and dagger crap for so many years. But there’s a flip side to it, Levi knows, that feeling of having to be there for someone, of having to be strong for someone else all the time. He remembers the feeling he had on the steps of the cottage, feeling so at peace with Erwin who didn’t need anything from him, for whom he didn’t need to be anyone. The thought seems strange now, that there could have been a time when Levi didn’t worry about the man, didn’t think he was someone for Levi to worry about.

They don’t discuss it the next time Levi goes over, though it’s clear to him that something is still weighing on Erwin’s mind. Levi still tries to think of something to say to the man, some piece of advice to give him, but knows he doesn’t possess any higher wisdom regarding the situation, having never experienced anything like it himself. When Erwin finally sits down at the secretaire Levi is almost relieved not to have to rack his brain any further, especially since it’s hardly used to the work.

Sitting around the dinner table later that night, Levi’s still thinking about it, whether there was more he could have done. Isabel seems to sense his unease, suggesting a game of klüberjass to pass the time. She’s barely dealt the cards when a piercing sound interrupts their quiet conversation, a loud howling of sirens in the distance.

“Air raid,” Farlan says at once and stands up, looking pale but calm. “Into the basement.”

Levi and Isabel nod, following Farlan out of the room after grabbing a quilt or a blanket each from the sitting room. The stairwell is alive with noise, footsteps and people calling out to each other as they all descend. Levi can feel his heart hammering in his chest as he grabs Isabel by her sleeve when she tries to speed to a run.

“We stick together,” he tells her quietly, nodding at Frau Schultz as she hurries past them down the steps to where Farlan stands, shouting directions at people, reminding them to keep calm and to leave all unnecessary belongings behind.

They shuffle into the cellar, Farlan coming in last and closing the door, muffling the sound of the sirens still blaring out their warning. They take their seats by Frau Gernhardt and her children, both of whom are clutching their favourite toys in their hands, looking scared and confused until Isabel coaxes them into some sort of a word game they have played many times before. Their mother looks grateful, moving closer to Levi and Farlan after making sure they're alright.

"I feel like there's nothing left to do now but listen for the sound of explosions," she says in a shushed voice; it seems everyone has one of those reserved for these situations, Levi noticed it already during the practice runs, as if they're all sitting by the side of someone who's about to die.

"It's most likely a false alarm," Farlan tries to reassure her. "Though I suppose that's not the most helpful way to think about it, in case it isn't. Did you bring your blankets?"

"Yes," she confirms, pointing at Hanna and Bruno who are both sitting on a folded up quilt. "So in case we need to run outside we just—"

"Dip them in that barrel of water, get them as wet as you can and wrap them around yourself and the children," Farlan finishes for her much more patiently than Levi could have; perhaps he is the best man for the job after all. "It's difficult to make a plan for these things when you can never know what's going to happen. But I'm sure we'll all be alright."

Levi looks at Farlan, surprised by how well he's pretending; it's been a while since he was this good at it. Levi wonders whether that is what keeps the man so calm, that feeling of imminent death he's spoken to Levi about. If it is, Levi is glad that he's still able to say these things to other people, especially in front of Isabel.

"Yes," Frau Gernhardt says, drawing a brave smile on her lips. "I'm sure we will."

They all fall quiet, breathing in the air that Levi imagines is already starting to grow stale. He thinks it's bad luck this happened on the evening of such a warm day; the small room is full of the stench of everyone's sweat, including his own, and no matter how long they spend down here his nose doesn't seem to get used to it. There's something about the whispering, the half-spoken words he can barely hear that makes his skin crawl; it reminds him of those last years at school, how whenever the teacher would mention the Jews the room would grow quiet just like this and still be full of murmuring, of people talking about him.

Just like Frau Gernhardt said, there's nothing left for Levi to do than wait to hear the muffled rumble of explosions in the distance. He thinks about Erwin, wondering whether he was at home when the sirens started blasting, wondering whether he's huddled in some basement like this with his neighbours, the nosy old hag from downstairs perhaps. He thinks Erwin would no doubt be the first to help everyone until he remembers that to everyone else he is Holtz, a Nazi piece of shit who would probably not give two shits about anyone, let alone his senile neighbours.

When the sirens howl out again, they all let out sighs of relief, gathering their blankets and oil lamps and candles and other meagre belongings and, in many cases, thanking Farlan for taking charge of the situation, before heading back into their apartments. Levi makes them a

pot of tea, wondering absently why he's not feeling more relieved that the whole thing was a false alarm; perhaps his ordeal with the Gestapo is still too fresh in his mind, numbing all lesser fear to a point where he can barely feel it.

"That was so exciting, wasn't it?" Isabel asks them as they sit down at the table to resume their game.

"It's not supposed to be exciting," Farlan scolds her. "It's smart to be a bit scared when that happens. One of these days it could be for a real cause. They might start bombing the city any day now."

"Well you weren't scared," Isabel counters indignantly, "and neither was big brother."

"I was a bit nervous," Levi tells her, picking up his cards. "Farlan's right, Isabel. It's not a game. And you can't go running off like you tried to, either. It's too easy to get lost in the crowd."

"Levi's right, you have to stay with him," Farlan repeats emphatically.

"Fine," she concedes, leaning her elbows against the table. "But you'll have to find us too, Farlan. When you've made sure everyone's safe."

"I will," he promises her quickly. "As long as we stay together we'll do just fine."

There are no new air raids during the weekend, but the experience is still fresh on Levi's mind when he arrives at Erwin's apartment the following Tuesday. The weather has cooled down considerably, making Levi regret pawning all his lighter jackets; his winter coat would stick out too much on the street. When the man answers the door, Levi doesn't waste time in getting the tea ready, carrying it out into the sitting room where the afternoon sun is painting the floorboards with gold.

"Yes, well," Erwin says when Levi asks him about the air raid, "these false alarms will probably happen more and more from now on."

"One of my neighbours," Levi starts, "her son told her Dresden isn't likely to be hit."

Erwin nods, drinking his tea. "Dresden is an unlikely target," he confirms; the words match the uniform he's wearing again, making Levi frown. "The distance from Britain is still too great for the bombers to cross. There are other cities much closer that make for much more reasonable destinations. Berlin, for instance."

"Guess I'm lucky to have left," Levi mutters into his cup.

"Indeed," Erwin says, pinching the bridge of his nose; something about it makes Levi notice the deep shadows under his eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asks Erwin who looks up, uttering a dry laugh.

“I’m fine, just a bit tired,” he explains dismissively, emptying his cup in one large gulp. “Work awaits.”

Levi nods, frowning as he follows Erwin with his eyes as he sits down in front of the secretaire heavily, like something has been wearing down his body to this point of exhaustion. His typing sounds slower as well; Levi listens to it as he does the dishes, imagining the man’s slumped figure and frowning ever more deeply. Without knowing what to do or say Levi makes him a sandwich and carries it to him, placing the plate by the typewriter.

“What’s that?” Erwin asks, his eyes never leaving the page; Levi glances at it, but doesn’t understand the words.

“A sandwich,” Levi tells him. “Don’t you have those where you come from?”

Erwin utters a laugh. “Yes, we do,” he says. “I was wondering why you brought me one.”

“You looked like you could use something to eat,” Levi explains, wiping a few specs of dust off the secretaire.

“Is that so?”

“Yes,” Levi insists, wishing the man would look up. “You look tired. Have you been sleeping?”

“Yes, Levi,” Erwin mutters, frowning down at the words he’s just written. “I have been sleeping. I told you, you shouldn’t worry about me.”

Before Levi can do anything more than let out a loud snort there’s another knock on the door that makes Erwin yank the page from the typewriter and start fitting a little golden key into the lock of the topmost drawer.

“Could you please get that?” he asks Levi hurriedly. “And if it’s Lilian could you please tell her I’ve gone out?”

Levi can’t help rolling his eyes as he crosses the hallway, opening the door hesitantly to greet a short, fleshy young man with blond hair and a score of freckles on his face. He’s carrying a large wooden box, sweating both from its weight and the number of steps, Levi guesses, wheezing a little as he peers at Levi from behind the case.

“A delivery for Herr Holtz,” he says breathlessly, moving his eyes from Levi to Erwin as the man appears behind him.

“Ah, yes,” Erwin replies, rushing in to get the box. “Come in and we’ll figure out how much this costs.”

The man wipes at his forehead with his sleeve, walking into the apartment as Levi closes the door behind him. He leaves a trail of dry dirt in his wake and Levi follows it into the kitchen where Erwin has set the crate down on the table. The plump little man has taken a seat on Levi’s chair and is busily fanning his face with his hat.

“Someone get me a glass of water, will you?” he manages to snap from his panting. “Can’t you see I’m dying here?”

Levi rolls his eyes as he rushes over to the sink to fill a glass with water, handing it to the man who empties it in a few large gulps before handing the glass back over.

“You should know this isn’t how we usually do business, Herr Holtz,” the man says, turning to Erwin who has laid the crate aside and taken a seat across the table. “I can’t say I much care for it.”

“I understand,” Erwin responds, looking at the man solemnly. “We should make this quick.”

“Letter from my father last week,” the man goes on. “He says he’s ready when you are, and that the others will know nothing about this, just as you instructed.”

“Good,” Erwin says, nodding absently. “Tell him his discretion will be rewarded.”

“It had better be,” the man mutters. “I don’t want that crazy one yapping on my heels again.”

“I assure you, it won’t come to that,” Erwin promises. “Not if we all perform our parts right.”

“We have someone in Geneva already,” the man continues. “One of ours, someone we can trust, like you said. Send word a few days in advance, I’ll let him know to expect them.”

“Good,” Erwin says again, sounding somewhat relieved to Levi. “So it’s settled.”

They both stand up, the stranger somewhat more slowly, and Erwin hands him a thick wad of Reichsmarks. The man counts them carefully twice before placing them in his pocket and taking Erwin’s extended hand.

“It’s a pleasure as always, Herr Reeves,” Erwin tells him, making the man sigh.

“I wish I could say the same thing,” he mutters before putting his hat back on and leaving the apartment.

Levi watches Erwin as he circles the table and takes a seat again, pressing his face into the palms of his hands for a moment before straightening his posture and pulling his cigarette case out of his pocket. He lights one and leans back in the chair, rubbing at his left temple with the tips of his fingers.

“Levi,” he says quietly, making Levi shift a bit closer from his spot by the sink. “Could you please empty the crate? There may be perishables.”

Levi crosses over to the wooden box without a word, lifting the lid off it to find a haphazard array of banned goods: American cigarettes, a small tin of tea, a jar of orange marmalade, a bar of that lavender soap, some fresh eggs and three bottles of wine. As he places the things into the cupboards and the pantry Levi keeps an eye on Erwin; the man seems to have forgotten his cigarette as he stares out of the window, a deep frown lining those thick eyebrows. Levi doesn’t have to wonder what has made Erwin feel like this; it’s all to do with that swine Osterhaus and his disgusting scheme that Erwin is forced to partake in.

“Hey,” Levi says quietly, sitting down at the table; it takes another try to catch Erwin’s attention.

“What is it?” the man asks him, wiping the ashes from his cigarette off the table while Levi hurries back over to the cupboard to get him a plate for them.

Levi hesitates for a moment, trying to think of something to say, anything that would sound helpful even in his head, but he finds nothing.

“I don’t know,” he finally admits, growing frustrated and huffing, “Why would you say I’m good with words when I’m fucking useless?”

“Is there something in particular you’d like to say right now?” Erwin asks him now, sounding genuinely interested, keeping his eyes on Levi even when he turns his head to exhale a cloud of smoke.

“I don’t know,” Levi says again. “Just that you look like shit, I guess.”

Erwin laughs quietly for a moment before rubbing at the space between his eyebrows with his thumb. “There’s no hiding these things from you, is there?”

Levi frowns. “I want to help you with—”

“No,” Erwin states sternly before Levi has finished his sentence. “You will not get caught up in this, Levi. I won’t allow it.”

“But it’s making you feel like—”

“Please,” Erwin interrupts him again, putting out his cigarette and turning to look at him, “do not argue with me on this, Levi. If you want to help me, grant me that.”

Levi falls quiet at that, his eyes still on Erwin, on those shadows under his eyes and that strained line of his mouth. He feels like swearing, he doesn’t know how to say these things, hardly ever knows what to do and now this. Does the man really expect him to just sit here quietly and watch it eat away at him day after day, like it doesn’t bother him to see Erwin like this? Does he really think Levi will be satisfied with doing so little, with making a promise not to do anything at all? He feels ready to jump out of his skin, ready to say anything, do anything to get that exhaustion and pain out of Erwin’s eyes. In the end he can only think of one thing, the only remedy he’s ever known, which forces him to his feet, to walk over to the man and extend his hand at which Erwin looks for a moment, confused.

“Come on,” Levi tells him, shivering as he feels the warmth of Erwin’s skin on his.

He leads Erwin into the bedroom, smelling that scent of cigarettes as he steps closer to unbutton the man’s shirt, pulling the hem of it free from the waist of the trousers before easing it over Erwin’s broad shoulders and throwing it into the laundry pile. The man’s white undershirt follows quickly; as Levi’s pulling it over his head, he glances at Erwin’s face which is full of a kind of incredulous amusement, and something else, something warm and grateful.

“This again?” Erwin asks him in a low, quiet voice.

“It’s not for me,” Levi replies, nodding at the man to take off his boots as he walks into the bathroom to get the water running into the tub.

He walks back out, giving Erwin’s wrist a gentle slap to make him hand over the task of unfastening his belt. The button fly comes next, and all the while Levi can sense Erwin looking at him, smiling, curious and affectionate. As Erwin steps out of his trousers Levi opens the door of his wardrobe, exposing the large mirror on the inside.

“Look at yourself for a minute without that revolting uniform on,” he tells the man before returning to tend to the bath, fetching the little stool Erwin sat on last time, and the little washcloth and lavender soap before taking a seat at the end of the tub and turning off the tap. “You can come in now, if you’ve had enough.”

Erwin laughs as he walks in; the sound of it makes Levi’s breathing easier. “It’s not such a fascinating sight,” he tells Levi who scoffs, trying to keep himself from glancing at the man as he steps into the tub, as if afraid that the sight will force him into a territory he’s not ready to explore.

“Some people might disagree,” he mutters as Erwin sits down, resting his arms on the edge of the tub. “Like Farlan. And Lilian, I’d think.”

Erwin lets out a low groan and Levi decides to drop the subject. He dips the small towel into the hot water and covers it in soap, just like Erwin did before, pressing the cloth gently onto the man’s skin; he flinches, but doesn’t speak, relaxing quickly under Levi’s touch. He starts rubbing the foam across Erwin’s shoulders, his neck, his back, taking direction from the soft sighs and moans the man lets out of his mouth.

“And this helps you, does it?” Erwin asks him after a while, tilting his head forward to let Levi rub at the short hair at the back of his head.

“It’s what I used to do when I was younger,” Levi tells him quietly. “Back in Berlin. It made me feel clean, but it was about more than that.”

“I never saw it as anything more,” Erwin admits, sighing again as Levi moves the washcloth over to his chest, “but I think I understand what you mean.”

Levi grunts to acknowledge the words, fighting to keep his gaze from wandering down the trail of hair between Erwin’s legs; he’s seen him before, it hardly makes sense for it to have such an effect on Levi now. He remembers the early morning by the river, the cold water against his body, the cool air prickling his skin, the tension of the moment when he noticed the effect he had on Erwin. He can still smell the cigarettes in the man’s hair as he leans closer, wishing he could lean his cheek against his neck and whisper something to his ear, though he doesn’t know what.

“Levi,” Erwin says, a note of hesitation in his voice. “I feel I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

Levi sits in silence for a while, pulling back the washcloth and considering Erwin's words. "You don't," he finally replies, thinking he knows what the man means.

"Good," Erwin sighs, glancing back at Levi. "This feels so uncomplicated and I—"

"It is," Levi assures him. "You shouldn't worry about it."

Erwin nods wordlessly, pressing back into Levi's touch when he resumes his task of washing him. "I don't want you to feel like there's anything you need to—"

His words are interrupted by yet another knock on the door that makes Levi drop the washcloth as Erwin sits up, causing the water to splash against the sides of the tub. They look at each other, there's a hint of exasperation and alarm on Erwin's expression that makes Levi nervous.

"I'll go see who it is," he tells Erwin. "If it's Lilian, I'll tell her you're out."

The man nods, looking worried; Levi can hear him splashing out of the tub behind him as he walks to the cupboard to dry his hands on one of the soft, clean towels. He walks into the hallway and to the door, feeling his heart hammering against his ribs, though he's not sure why; it's most likely nothing, he reminds himself as he opens the door again.

His eyes meet a woman, heavily pregnant and holding a large handbag and a small piece of paper; Levi can make out Erwin's address written on it in pencil. She looks at him, confused, then at the number on the door, then back at Levi again.

"Can I help you?" he asks her, trying to sound polite as her mouth widens to a smile.

"Yes, hello, I'm sorry," she says, glancing down at the piece of paper she's holding. "I'm afraid I've got the wrong apartment. I'm looking for a Sturmbannführer Holtz? I'm sorry, I only had this address and well, it's quite old and I—"

"He lives here," Levi interrupts to tell her, pausing for a moment to look at her oval-shaped face and the soft curls of auburn hair falling to her shoulders. "Give me a moment and I'll fetch him for you."

"That's very kind of you," the woman says, stepping into the apartment, resting a hand on her swollen belly as she steps aside to let Levi close the door. "Thank you so much."

Levi nods without speaking, walking through the bathroom to find Erwin getting dressed in the clothes he wore before; Levi can see the handgun resting on the washstand.

"It's some woman," Levi tells the man in a whisper, picking up his shirt from the floor and handing it to him.

"Lilian?" Erwin asks him, making Levi roll his eyes.

"I know what Lilian looks like. It's not her," he reminds Erwin, hesitating for a moment before adding, "Pregnant."

“What?”

“She’s pregnant,” Levi repeats sullenly, taking another moment to lose a battle with himself and adding, “Do you reckon it’s yours?”

An expression of confusion mixed with wild panic enters Erwin’s face for a moment before he frowns and shakes his head. “I don’t...” he starts, his words trailing off for a moment. “Did she give a name?”

“Don’t you think I would have told you if she had?” Levi asks him back irritably, frowning as Erwin picks up the handgun. “What are you going to do? Shoot a pregnant woman?”

The man gives him a warning glance before placing the gun on his belt behind his back before exiting the room in a few hasty strides. Levi follows him more slowly, still keeping the distance between them short enough for him to be able to grab the gun should the situation demand it. As they walk around the corner to the decorative double doors, Erwin suddenly stops, leaving Levi lingering by the armchair.

“Marie?” Levi hears him gasp; the woman in the hallway laughs as the man rushes forward with Levi following behind, lurking by the double doors, watching him embrace her with some effort. “My God! Is it really you?”

“You can bet your bottom dollar on that,” she tells him, still laughing, her hand coming up to stroke his smiling face as soon as they break their connection. “It’s so good to see you! My Commander.”

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I have literally been working on this for fourteen hours today and I didn't even have the energy to read through it after doing the re-writes but I hope it's alright. Also I am in the process of changing every Mrs/Mr to Frau/Herr just because you know. I should actually have done that from the beginning but I didn't think far enough ahead. I'll change the rest of the chapters once I get the chance.

The next chapter will be posted on February 19th.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

From his lurking post by the decorative double doors Levi watches as Erwin embraces the woman again and the memory of the letter fragment he found all those months ago suddenly resurfaces, though the exact words Erwin used have been lost. He remembers the passage about loneliness better than any other, perhaps because something about it has bothered Levi ever since. *“I know you understand this loneliness better than most”* – that’s how Erwin put it – *“and only you know how all this affects me”*. Levi’s eyes move from Erwin to the woman, to her modest dress, to the curve of her full breasts, to the warm smile on her lips, and it takes him a moment to recognise the feeling he gets: relief.

“My God,” Erwin says again, taking a step back and surveying her figure. “You look like you’re—”

“Whatever you do, do *not* say ready to give birth any day now,” she interrupts him, heaving an exasperated sigh and stroking her swollen belly. “I’ve another month to go still, and this blasted thing keeps getting bigger and bigger.”

Erwin laughs. “I *was* going to say that,” he admits, “but this is such wonderful news! Congratulations!”

The woman smiles again. “Thank you, sweetheart,” she says, “The timing of it isn’t ideal, of course, but there’s very little one can do about that, in the end.”

“Of course. But please, come in, come in,” Erwin replies, ushering her further into the apartment; Levi abandons his post by the doors and retreats into the kitchen as they enter, hearing Erwin say, “Let me get you something. A cup of tea? A glass of water?”

“Tea would be lovely,” she tells him, “though I wouldn’t say no to a glass of water to start with, either.”

“Of course. Let me get it for you,” Erwin says again, appearing suddenly in the kitchen, surprised at the sight of Levi. “There you are. I wondered where you had gotten to.”

“I just thought...” Levi starts, finishing in a shrugs when he runs out of words.

“Don’t worry,” Erwin tells him in a whisper. “She knows.”

“About you?” Levi asks, meeting Erwin’s nod with a frown. “How?”

“It’s a long story,” he says somewhat evasively. “I’ll tell it to you some other time if you want, but right now I’d like to introduce you to her. With your permission, of course.”

“As who?” Levi asks now, lowering his voice to a mumble.

“Whoever you’re comfortable with,” Erwin replies, smiling at him. “You can trust her, I’m sure of that. Long ago she asked me to—”

The man’s words cut off suddenly and it seems to Levi like they came out carelessly against Erwin’s better judgement. Levi watches as the nearly startled expression on his face disappears behind a frown and a sigh, feeling a sting of frustration.

“Perhaps there’s a better time for that story as well,” Erwin finally says, passing Levi to busy himself with filling a pot with water. “What matters is that she is trustworthy. I can give you my full assurance of that.”

Levi nods wordlessly, watching the man turn this way and that in the small kitchen as he looks for something, laying out the teapot and three cups on a tray before turning back to open and close the doors of the cupboards.

“Don’t get a cup for me,” Levi tells him quietly. “I don’t think I’ll stay that long.”

“Oh?” Erwin asks, glancing at him repeatedly while running water into a jug.

“It’s getting late,” Levi explains in short. “I should head back.”

“Obviously I don’t want to keep you,” Erwin says, “but I also want you to know your presence is in no way getting in the way of—”

“I know,” Levi interrupts him, “but you two obviously haven’t seen each other in a long time. I’m sure you’ve got a lot to talk about. And like I said, I should be getting home soon.”

“Will you meet her at least?” Erwin asks him. “I would very much like for the two of you to get acquainted.”

Levi considers the request for a moment before nodding, smiling briefly as he sees Erwin’s expression growing pleased. He follows Erwin with his eyes as he leaves the kitchen to take the water out to the sitting room, returning a moment later for the tea which Levi has gotten

ready. As the man carries the tray into the sitting room, Levi shuffles in behind him, hovering awkwardly by Erwin's side until he frees his hands.

"I'd like you to meet a very good friend of mine," Erwin tells Levi, still smiling happily. "This is Marie."

"Lovely to meet you," she says, extending her hand which Levi shakes briefly, noticing Erwin has left the choosing of a name to him.

"You too," Levi replies, feeling like he's not being quite polite enough. "I'm Levi."

"What a lovely name," she says, smiling. "Tell me Levi, are you originally from Dresden?"

Levi shakes his head. "Berlin," he tells her, making her narrow her eyes knowingly.

"See, I knew I heard it in the way you speak!" she says. "Well, us Berliners have to stick together, don't we? How long has it been since you left?"

"Almost five years," Levi replies, wondering whether this is what polite conversation is like or whether the woman is trying to find out something more specific about him.

"Oh, so long ago!" she exclaims. "So you've not seen what's become of the city. It's chilling, all the bombings – I have to tell you, it's been almost strange living somewhere that's still in one piece!" She pauses to thank Erwin who hands her a cup of tea. "Not that I really blame the British, or the Americans for that matter. I'm afraid we rather brought this on ourselves."

"In the end we'll all be judged for what we've done," Erwin joins the conversation sitting down into the other armchair with his cup of tea. "There will be no innocents left by the time this war is over."

"I'm sure you're right," Marie sighs, looking down at her belly. "I suppose our only hope is that our children will learn from our mistakes."

The affection in Erwin's eyes as he watches her is enough to make Levi feel that sense of relief again and he lets it empty his lungs into a quiet sigh.

"I don't doubt that you'll teach your child well," Erwin tells her, his voice warm and soft. "You and Nile."

"We'll do our best," she replies, uttering a laugh. "But where are your manners, Erwin? You haven't laid out a cup for Levi!"

"I can't stay," Levi says, taking a few steps toward the double doors. "I should be getting home."

"What a shame," Marie says, and somehow it sounds to Levi like she means it. "I was looking forward to getting to know you better. Any true friend of Erwin's is a friend of mine, after all."

"Likewise," Levi replies awkwardly, "but I really do need to go."

“I hope we’ll meet again soon,” she says. “I have a sneaking suspicion you’re the reason Erwin looks to be in such good health. You’re the one who’s been taking care of him, aren’t you?”

Levi glances at Erwin who’s scratching the back of his head sheepishly. “Well, I’ve been doing my best,” Levi estimates, “but he’s fucking hopeless, isn’t he?”

Marie laughs. “Oh, yes. Absolutely hopeless.”

“You both judge me so unfairly,” Erwin objects light-heartedly. “I’m not entirely without skill to care for myself.”

“I’ve said all I have to say about what I think of your so-called skills,” Levi tells him. “I won’t get into it again – to save you some embarrassment.”

Marie’s giggling fills the room and she’s even forced to lay down her cup to keep from spilling the tea. “I have to admit the first thought I had after looking at the apartment was ‘my, how clean it looks in here’,” she says. “I had a feeling it wasn’t Erwin’s doing.”

Levi shakes his head. “You should’ve seen this place,” he says, clicking his tongue. “A complete shit hole.”

“Oh, come on now,” Erwin protests again. “I hardly think that term is necessary.”

“Honestly, Erwin,” Marie says, sipping at her tea again, “you should leave making these assessments to the professionals, and trust us when we tell you how things are.”

Erwin’s sigh seems a sign of surrender. “Well,” he says, “I suppose you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“Of course not, dear,” Marie tells him with a reassuring smile that reminds Levi of something, though he can’t remember what.

It stays on his mind while he makes his way back home, reflecting on the evening as he walks. He thinks about how Erwin was, the sadness and exhaustion etched on his features that turned so quickly into joy. Levi remembers his own clumsy attempts at trying to make the man feel better, feeling a mild ache in his chest at the memory; it reminds him sharply of the fact that whatever his talents in life may be, making people feel better, knowing the right things to say just isn’t one of them. It pains him to feel so useless, so inadequate, so unfit to give Erwin what he needs right now, being able to offer very little besides lingering silences and a well-drawn bath.

Levi’s thoughts move to Marie and the effect her mere presence seemed to have on Erwin, easing instantly that pain that was so clear in the man’s voice just moments earlier. It would be easy for Levi to grudge her for it, for the effortlessness with which she was able to do what Levi himself is barely capable of under the best of circumstances, to feel jealous for her past with Erwin, for all the things she knows about him which Levi has only been able to guess at. If there is some sort of resentment he has for Marie, Levi doesn’t recognise it, and

all he finds when he thinks of her is the look on Erwin's face as he embraced her, that happiness and relief. Besides, Levi thinks as he walks up the stairs to his apartment, it's not how things are with Erwin and him; there's no claim either of them could attest to having for the other. Like Erwin said, there is no need for explanations, no need for making things any more complicated than they already are, no need to try to make this something that it isn't, something it cannot be.

"You're home early," Farlan comments as Levi walks into the kitchen.

"I don't usually stay the night, you know," Levi reminds him, laying the usual paper bag of food onto the counter and starting to empty it into the cupboards.

"The reasons for which are beyond me," the man mutters, dealing himself and Isabel another hand each as Levi clicks his tongue.

"Do you want to play, big brother?" Isabel asks him, making him shake his head.

"I'm going to have a quick bath," he says, placing the money Erwin gave him in the empty tin box where they keep their savings. "Have you had supper already?"

Farlan nods. "We saved some for you," he replies distractedly, peering down at his cards. "Just some bread with a boiled egg each."

Levi nods and fetches his towel before exiting the apartment again, locking the door of the communal bathroom behind himself before turning the tap to fill the tub. Like due to some miracle, the water spouting out is suddenly warm, not as hot as Levi would like but warm enough to ensure an experience that isn't entirely miserable. He undresses quickly, sitting down in the half-empty tub and stretching out his legs as far as he can before leaning back and closing his eyes, dreaming about Erwin's bathroom, the shiny tiles he scrubs himself, the spotless white of the porcelain surfaces, the faint smell of lavender that takes his mind back to that calm moment just a few hours before.

As the water in the tub rises to his chest, Levi reaches to turn off the tap, his knees poking into the cool air of the room despite the tub being full. Such a miserable size, nothing at all like Erwin's, which is much larger than any Levi is used to, even if for Erwin it seemed barely long enough to accommodate his legs. It drew Levi's attention to the size of his body again, the way he looked in the tub; having gotten so used to the sight of the man he has almost started to see past it. An image comes to Levi, of Erwin's body, of the firmness of his muscles as Levi ran the soapy towel over his back and shoulders. He can feel his cheeks growing warm even now as he thinks about it, how he couldn't keep his eyes from glancing at that thicket of dark blond hair between Erwin's legs.

Slowly, tentatively, like afraid any sudden move will make him change his mind, Levi brings his hand down where the itchy stubble from before is starting to grow out. It still feels strange, bristly and soft at the same time, making everything more accessible, all the changes more pronounced. They take Levi by surprise in their sharpness and urgency as he wraps his hand gently around himself, making a few hesitant moves, almost wondering whether it's possible to forget how to do this until some baser instinct takes over his mind. His other hand quickly joins the first to give attention to other parts, less prominent but equally responsive.

In his mind it's Erwin he's doing all this to, it's Erwin whose head is falling back, lips pressed together to keep in his sighs and moans, Erwin whose legs are trying to find more room at the foot of the tub as he keeps pushing up with his hips, growing more forceful and impatient by the second as he nears his climax and reaches it, gasping and gritting his teeth as he shivers in the water he has made unclean.

Levi's legs feel shaky as he climbs out of the tub and drains it, drying and dressing himself quickly before turning to look at himself in the mirror. Something disquieting seems to be making its way to the surface, something that Krieger has brought into being, something Levi is fighting to match with his defiance as he stares at his own reflection, feeling like it's the first time in years he's really seen himself. His eyes seem darker now and his brows thinner as they knit above them, pushing away those images that he won't allow to taint what he's just done, what he's just gotten back after such a long time.

"How is Erwin?" Farlan asks as Levi joins him in their bed with his sandwich and boiled egg which he wolfs down, careful not to drop any crumbs on the sheets.

Levi shrugs, placing the plate on the nightstand. "Well enough," he replies. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason in particular," Farlan says, drawing the covers closer to his chin as Levi lies down in the bed. "It seems like you have managed to resolve whatever it was that happened between you two."

"We have," Levi states in short, stretching out his legs and yawning.

"I'm glad for that at least," the other man mutters. "You were such a pain before. I pray to God I never have to watch you spend another day sulking around the apartment."

"I'm sorry," Levi whispers; the words fall more easily now. "I get restless."

"I know," Farlan tells him, smiling but looking concerned. "Do you want to tell me what happened? I know it's been a while but--"

"I don't really want to get into it again," Levi interrupts him, staring at the ceiling. "I was acting like an ungrateful brat, that's all."

From the corner of his eye Levi can see Farlan nodding. "Well," he says quietly, "it's good you've moved past it now. It will feel like enough of a waste of time as it is."

Levi glances at Farlan and cringes at the distant expression on his face; he's thinking about Christofer again, Levi guesses, probably about the month he spent not talking to him, and how badly he now wishes he could get that time back. Levi wonders whether there will come a time when he feels the same way about the two weeks he spent avoiding Erwin and it takes him a moment to remember they are not like Farlan and Christofer.

"Just..." the other man starts, sighing. "Try not to push him away."

"Do I do that?" Levi asks, frowning.

“You keep people at a distance,” Farlan explains. “You probably think it’ll protect you from something, but with things being as they are you’ll just end up dying without ever having felt it.”

“Felt what?”

Farlan sighs again. “You’ll know when you do,” he merely says before turning off the light.

The following morning they both get up early, leaving Isabel to her U-Boats as they walk to the shops; the queues start forming in front of them earlier and earlier these days, and by the time they arrive there are already a dozen people waiting for their share of flour and vegetables. They take their place in the line, waiting patiently for the shop to open as more and more people pour in, women with their baskets and prams. Levi thinks with Farlan he sticks out like a sore thumb, but it seems the other man’s skills with people have bought him a place in their ranks; Levi marvels at the ease with which he joins the conversations, complaining about the air raids and the price of meat and the difficulty of living in a city these days. It seems to Levi to be something of a ritual, standing in a circle and complaining, though it always seems to end the same way.

“But then, we must all do our part and cut back on some things,” one of the women sighs and everyone around her nods in agreement. “No doubt we’ll have more than we need again soon, once Russia is beaten.”

Levi catches a few people glancing at each other nervously, like wishing to speak out, but in the end no one does. Further down the line someone is reading the day’s newspaper out loud, another thing Levi has observed becoming a habit. There’s a tightly knit bunch of women around her, hanging on to every word.

“How dreadful,” Levi hears one of them gasp. “I used to work in a house not far from there.”

“I’m sure you’re right, Gisela,” Farlan agrees, too loudly and familiarly for Levi’s liking. “The Führer will set things right in no time. Mark my words, a year from now we’ll all be baking gugelhupfs and drinking port by the barrelful.”

The women around him laugh and even the nervous-looking ones give a smile. They think of him as some odd form of entertainment, Levi realises, a harmless eccentric who brings them a few laughs when they happen to cross paths.

“Do you bake a lot of gugelhupfs, Herr Meissner?” one of them asks, making Farlan scoff.

“All the time, my dear Rosalind,” he exclaims, making all the women laugh again. “I use my mother’s recipe and it has never failed me, not once.”

“Ooh, can you imagine?” another woman joins in, pushing a pram back and forth to keep her baby asleep. “Climbing up the stair from doing laundry all evening and finding a freshly baked cake on the stove next to your smiling husband?”

“That’ll be the day!” Gisela replies and laughs. “For twenty years I haven’t been able to get my Rudi to do so much as pick up his own dirty socks and put them in the laundry.”

“Fate has been so unkind to you in that aspect,” Farlan states mournfully. “If I were married to any of you fine ladies, I would treat you like the queens that you are.”

The statement rouses another wave of hilarity in the bunch, and Levi wonders whether the women see past the pretence. “You should be careful about what you say, Herr Meissner,” one of them says. “There are plenty of widowers in this city now who would love to find themselves on the arm of such a gentleman.”

“And how I wish I could take them all under my protection,” Farlan declares, raising a few giggles, “but alas, my heart belongs to another. To pretend otherwise would be the lowest form of betrayal.”

“Oh?” Gisela voices, suddenly curious. “You’ve a sweetheart then? Are you promised to each other already?”

“Ours is a tale of tragedy and woe,” Farlan explains. “I’m afraid many obstacles still lie between us and our happiness.”

“The war has broken so many hearts,” Rosalind says, her eyes growing misty. “I’m sorry to hear it has happened to you too.”

“As am I that it’s happened to you, my dear Rosalind,” Farlan says, sighing theatrically and taking her hand in his, raising a blush to her cheeks, “but we must keep faith that one day we’ll both find our happiness.”

“You shouldn’t draw attention to yourself like that,” Levi tells him when they finally get back to the apartment. “You’re making yourself too memorable.”

Farlan scoffs. “As long as they all still like me I doubt they’ll be any trouble,” he says, dropping the bag of shopping on the kitchen table and taking a seat, stretching out his legs and groaning. “That’s really becoming an ordeal. How can it take so long to buy a bag of flour?”

“At least you’re not doing it with three snotty brats pulling on your sleeves the whole time and screaming their heads off,” Levi reminds him as he starts to place their meagre groceries into the cupboards. “Shitty luck being what we are, but at least we’re not women.”

Farlan agrees in another tired moan that turns into a yawn. “I still need to get started on lunch,” the man states tiredly. “Though I suppose now it’ll be closer to dinner. It just never ends, does it?”

“No,” Levi simply replies, making Farlan utter a laugh. “You would’ve made a terrible woman.”

“I would’ve made a very good woman,” Farlan argues. “Just not of... whatever class this is.”

Levi snorts. "Wearing gowns and throwing parties, keeping your man happy," he lists as Farlan laughs. "That sort of thing?"

"My speciality exactly," he says, getting up and stretching his back. "That, and gugelhupfs."

"What the fuck even is a gugelhupf?" Levi asks, wiping at the table with a wet rag.

"Oh, you peasant," Farlan tells him and sighs. "It's a cake, Levi. A very delicious cake that I miss more and more every day."

"I guess I should be glad some people can afford shit like that," he mutters, folding up the paper bag and placing it in a basket for kindling.

"That question falls outside my area of expertise," Farlan tells him with a smile, backing out of the room. "Leave the meat on the table. I'll get started on it in a minute."

"Take your time," Levi tells the man as he leaves the apartment.

He kneels down to scrub at the soot-stained door of the oven, folding the rag to fit a small corner of it into the ridges of the handle and the brand of the manufacturer, anywhere where he can see dirt has gathered, continuing by wiping down the plate lifter. He's just about to start emptying the ashes into a dustbin when he hears the door opening and closing behind him.

"Give me a second before you start," Levi says. "This blasted thing needs to be cleaned every two days..."

"Big brother..."

Levi turns around at the first sound of Isabel's voice, full of a fear like he's never heard in it before. He stands up at the sight of her petrified expression, her eyes wide and her face pale, her bottom lip quivering as she lifts up her hands. They're covered in blood nearly up to the wrists, the source for which Levi's frantic eyes find running down from between her legs.

"Oh, God," he gasps, running over to her as she sinks onto her bed, staring at her hands. "Oh no, no, no, no, no."

"I'm bleeding," Isabel mutters, still wide-eyed, bringing her hands closer to her face as Levi kneels down in front of her.

"Isabel," he says, trying in vain to catch her attention. "Fuck! Isabel. Look at me."

She turns her gaze up slowly, looking into Levi's eyes though she doesn't appear to see him. "I was trying to make it stop," she whispers. "I was trying to—"

"Isabel," Levi says again, grabbing her by the arms as he thinks of what's been done to her, how she's been hurt and humiliated, her body breached, like Krieger used to do to him. He lives it all again in a flash of hateful memories, the repeated intrusion and assault blurring together as Levi forces them to the back of his mind again. "You need to tell me what happened. Who did this to you? I need to know—"

His words are cut off by Farlan returning; the man walks into the kitchen, stopping dead on his tracks by the door as he sees them.

“What’s going on?” he asks, perplexed, as Levi gets up and walks over to him.

“She came back like this,” Levi tells him quietly, still looking at Isabel, feeling tears in his eyes. “Oh, fuck, Farlan, I think something really bad has happened to her. She’s bleeding, she’s... Someone’s hurt her, Farlan, and I don’t know—”

“Calm down,” the other man snaps at him, putting down the post he’s carried up from the letterbox. “You’re frantic. I can’t understand you.”

“Just look at her!” Levi shouts back at him. “We should never have let her go out by herself, we should have been more careful, it’s all my fault, I should’ve looked after her better, I should—”

“Shut up, Levi,” Farlan barks at him, squatting down in front of the girl. “Isabel, I know you’re scared but I need to know. Did someone hurt you? Is that why you’re bleeding?”

Slowly, like coming out of a trance, she shakes her head. “I don’t...” she mutters. “It just started and I can’t make it stop. I tried to make it stop...”

“Oh, Levi,” Farlan sighs, hanging his head for a moment before looking up at him. “You complete and utter idiot.”

“What?” he asks the man, but he ignores him, turning back to Isabel instead.

“Isabel,” he calls her name, softly and soothingly. “Isabel, listen to me. There’s no need to be scared. You’re not hurt, and there’s nothing wrong with you. Alright? What’s happening to you is completely natural. You’re not in any danger.”

“I’m not?” she asks him, the look in her eyes still distant as he shakes his head, smiling calmingly.

“No, you’re not,” he assures her again. “I have to admit I don’t know much about what’s happening to you but I know it’s not dangerous. It happens to all women when they get to a certain age, so you don’t need to worry.”

“Why?” she asks as Levi finally grasps a hold of the situation; her question makes Farlan cringe a bit. “Why does it happen?”

“I really wish I could tell you,” he says, “but I just don’t know. If you wait a minute, though, I’ll try and come up with something. Alright?”

She nods as Farlan gets to his feet, walking over to Levi and pulling him into the sitting room by his hand.

“You idiot!” he snaps at Levi, slapping his arm. “How could you do that?! You scared her half to death, reacting like you did!”

“How was I supposed to know?” Levi counters feebly, feeling his embarrassment burning his cheeks. “What the fuck do you suppose I know about women? I can’t even remember my own mother, for fuck’s sake!”

“I don’t care,” Farlan insists. “She clearly doesn’t understand what’s happening to her, which means no one had time to tell her about it before, which means it’s up to me – and you, heaven help us – to find a way to teach her about... it.”

“Well I don’t know anything about it,” Levi says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Do you know anything about it?”

Farlan shrugs. “It happens?” he offers, making Levi roll his eyes. “Once a month? Or thereabouts? It has something to do with how babies are born.”

“See?” Levi huffs irritably. “You don’t know any more about it than I do!”

“Well at least I knew enough to let her know she’s not dying!” Farlan counters heatedly, taking a deep breath and running his hands through his hair. “Alright. Here’s what we need to do. We need to find someone who can explain it to her properly and to teach her about... hygiene, and things.”

“How are we going to do that?” Levi asks him, feeling a pang of desperation. “Everyone still thinks she’s a boy. How can we just tell someone she isn’t?”

“Because we have to,” Farlan states firmly, falling quiet to think for a moment before continuing. “You’ll tell Frau Gernhardt. You’ll say we did it to protect her. She’ll understand.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Farlan shrugs. “Then I’ll be even happier that you and Erwin are on speaking terms,” he says, making Levi heave a resigned sigh.

“You’re right,” he agrees quietly. “We can’t just do nothing.”

“We should do it now,” Farlan decides. “She’s gone through enough for one day.”

Levi nods, following the other man into the kitchen where he sits down on the bed next to Isabel who looks calmer, but confused.

“Levi and I are going to step outside for a minute,” he tells the girl, “but we’ll be right back and then, hopefully, you’ll get an explanation for this whole thing. Alright?”

She nods, still frowning, and they take their leave, walking down the stairs to the first floor where Farlan places three loud knocks on Frau Gernhardt’s door. She invites them in, looking surprised and confused by the sombre expressions on their faces.

“Is it alright if I sit with the children for little bit while Lukas has a word with you?” Farlan asks her, making her ever more perplexed.

“Of course,” she says, leading Levi into a small kitchen, identical in build to theirs but much homelier, with tea towels and a plate shelf full of blue china plates. “I hope it’s nothing serious. You both look so grim.”

“Nothing too serious, no,” Levi starts, sitting down at the table and refusing a cup of grain coffee when she offers it. “You’ll probably think it’s strange, though.”

“Oh?” Frau Gernhardt voices, sitting down as well. “How so?”

“Well,” he tries to start, lost for words. “The thing is... My little brother.”

“Yes?”

“He... isn’t,” Levi manages, cringing at his own clumsy words. “She’s my sister. I know how it looks. It must seem really strange for us to lie to everyone like that. We thought it would be safer, letting everyone think she was—”

“Please, Herr Weller, you don’t need to explain,” she interrupts him, smiling knowingly. “She spends an awful lot of time here, you know. I’m not as easily fooled as some of the others.”

“So you know?” Levi asks her, surprised, and she nods.

“I noticed it a while ago,” she explains. “I suppose it has to do with having children of my own. It makes me pay more attention, I think. But obviously I didn’t want to say anything. It seemed like the kind of thing one hardly brings up.”

Levi looks at her across the table, feeling a wave of relief crash over him. “Oh,” he barely states. “Good. That makes this easier then.”

“What does she need?” Frau Gernhardt asks now, her slim brows drawn into a delicate frown.

“She’s...” Levi starts again, wondering how best to put it and what to call it. “Come to a certain age when... Well... It’s just that Friedrich and I don’t know much about these things.”

“Is she so old already?” Frau Gernhardt mutters more to herself it seems. “Say no more, Herr Weller. I understand perfectly what you’re getting at, and I’ll be happy to help.”

“Oh, good,” Levi huffs. “She seems really upset about it. Our mother died when we were very young, you know, and she didn’t have the time to explain it to her.”

“It’s understandable that she’s upset,” she says. “It can be a frightening time for a young woman, especially without the proper sort of guidance in these matters.”

“Yes,” Levi agrees. “Well, Friedrich and I are really not the proper sort of guidance. I didn’t even realise what it was at first. I thought someone had hurt her, you know.”

“Well, as a man I don’t think it would be very appropriate for you to know an awful lot about these things and I hardly think you’re expected to,” Frau Gernhardt muses, her expression growing serious as she continues. “I can’t blame you for what you have done, hiding who she really is. One hardly talks about these things – it’s rather unseemly to – but the world can be a

cruel place for a young woman. I think it's very prudent and good of you not to pretend to be ignorant about that."

"I'm just trying to do what's best for her," Levi replies. "We've only got each other left, and Friedrich now. If I don't protect her who will?"

"And sometimes the best way to do that is to ask for help," she says, smiling again. "You needn't worry, Herr Weller. I understand the value of the secret you've entrusted me with, and I promise I won't reveal it to anyone."

"Thank you," Levi says, sighing. "It's such a relief. She's really fond of you, you know, and I can't think of a better person to talk her through it. She seemed so scared and confused."

"Let us not waste time then," she says, getting up from her seat as Levi does the same. "Let me just get some things before we go."

She meets Levi by the door a few minutes later carrying a toiletry bag, calling out to Hanna and Bruno that she'll be right back before walking up to the third floor with Levi, turning to him at the door after he closes it behind them.

"What's her name?" she asks Levi in a whisper and he replies, making her smile. "Oh, how lovely."

"Yes, it is," Levi agrees, smiling as well. "I'll just... Give you two some privacy," he continues, nodding awkwardly toward the sitting room.

"I think it'll be best," Frau Gernhardt agrees, straightening her skirt before walking into the kitchen. Levi can hear Isabel greeting her anxiously before starting to talk so fast and for so long Frau Gernhardt needs to interrupt her; it sounds to Levi strangely like she's been waiting for her all this time.

By the time they've finished talking their late lunch has turned into a late dinner and Levi has run out of things to arrange in their sparse sitting room, turning instead to stare out of the window at how the wind keeps tearing at the leaves on a tree; some of them are already starting to turn a pale yellow at the tips. He only looks up when he hears Isabel and Frau Gernhardt leaving the kitchen, catching a glimpse of Isabel's back as she exits the apartment.

"How did it go?" he asks Frau Gernhardt after crossing the room to her.

"Quite well," she assures him with a smile. "Now, there are some things she will need, and I think it would be best if I went and got them for her."

"Absolutely," Levi agrees instantly. "I wouldn't know anything about what to get or where to get it or—"

"Exactly," the woman interrupts him. "Not to mention it'll be far less conspicuous."

“I’ll pay for it of course,” Levi hurries to add. “Whatever she needs, no matter how much it costs.”

“One can hardly skimp on these things,” she says with a sigh. “I’ve asked her to sit with Hanna and Bruno so I can go out and get what she needs right away, if that’s alright.”

“Of course,” Levi agrees. “The sooner the better, I guess.”

She takes her leave and Levi walks back into the kitchen, getting to changing the sheets on Isabel’s bed, leaving them to soak in a bucket of cold water before taking a seat at the table and sighing heavily, feeling stupid and embarrassed. Of course the mistake was hardly his fault – Levi can’t remember ever having spared the thing a single thought before this, and now that he thinks about it he’s not even sure how he knows about its existence in the first place. Through the mist of years passed Levi recalls a single incident when washing Kenny’s sheets he found a stain of blood on them. He was seeing a woman at the time, though Levi can’t remember her name or what she looked like and isn’t sure Kenny ever introduced her to him; chances are she was gone by the time the sheets had finished drying.

When Farlan returns he joins Levi at the table, leaning his arms on it and laying his head between them, letting out a low, tired groan.

“Remind me never to have children,” he tells Levi sullenly, making him utter a dry laugh.

“Do you really think I’ll have to?” he asks the man whose mouth splits into a wide yawn before he laughs as well.

“No,” he admits, turning his head just enough to see Levi. “How did it go?”

“Good, I guess,” he says, shrugging. “You were right, though. I’m an idiot.”

Farlan waves his hand in a lazy arch that ends on the table. “Who even knows about these things?” he muses. “The only reason I know anything about it is because I saw my mother bleeding once when I was a little boy and I wouldn’t stop asking about it even though she didn’t want to tell me.”

“Why is it such a secret?” Levi asks now. “How can anyone even keep a thing like that secret?”

““When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening,”” Farlan mutters, resting his head on his arms and closing his eyes.

“What’s that?” Levi asks him, making him snort a laugh.

“Leviticus, chapter fifteen,” he says. “Discharges causing uncleanness.”

“Well it’s fucking stupid,” Levi tells him. “Where do you learn this crap anyway?”

“You forget,” Farlan says, pulling himself up and reaching for the parcel of meat still resting on the table, “there was a time when I was a good Catholic boy. Besides, it’s your holy book

more than it is mine – sort of, anyway.”

“Well, it’s still fucking stupid,” Levi counters. “And you know I don’t know anything about any of that.”

“I know,” Farlan states, sighing dramatically as he gets to his feet. “No mother, no father, no God. No wonder you turned out such a sinner.”

“What’s your excuse then?”

Farlan lets out another snort of laughter before walking over to their little linen cupboard, picking up the post and bringing it to Levi.

“Another letter for you,” he says, handing the envelope over.

Levi looks at the large, almost child-like handwriting on the paper: *L. Weller*. His hand aches to close around it, to crumple it up and let it burn, but he hesitates as the questions of what’s written inside start to flood his mind. No doubt Krieger would have found his lack of response insulting, but to what degree? Would he be hurt enough to do something drastic, to report Levi to the Gestapo? Could the distance and Levi’s coldness have made him realise the feelings he mistakes for love are actually anything but, or made him see that Levi has never treated him with any amount of warmth or given any indication of finding the man anything but repulsive?

Levi keeps staring at the envelope, feeling Farlan’s eyes on him as he thinks about the previous night, the defiance he was forced to involve in that act that once seemed as simple and natural as eating or sleeping. In his mind it is perfectly clear to Levi why that is, whose fault it is and, realising he’ll rather get back onto that train platform than waste another second of his life on Krieger, Levi rips the envelope in half, then into quarters, using them to set a fire under the stove as Farlan watches on.

“Any more of those show up you burn them,” Levi tells him quietly, making the other man nod in response.

Isabel returns just as Farlan is finishing the gravy, glancing at the clean sheets on her bed before taking a seat at the table where Levi is polishing their spoons.

“Are you alright?” he asks her, getting a curt nod as a reply. “Did it go alright with Frau Gernhardt?”

“It went fine,” she says, pinching her lips together and drawing a quick, deep breath. “I don’t want you to clean my sheets like that.”

“Oh,” Levi voices, taken aback by the sharpness of her tone. “I just thought you’d–”

“I’ll clean them myself if I need to,” she tells him almost sullenly without looking at either of them as a tense silence fills the kitchen. “I’m not a baby. I can take care of my own things.”

“I know,” Levi tells her quietly, feeling a strain in his chest. “I know you can.”

“You both need to stop treating me like I’m some stupid idiot baby who doesn’t know how to do anything when half the time you don’t know how to do anything yourselves,” Isabel snaps at them, making Farlan and Levi exchange a look.

“As you wish,” Farlan tells her calmly. “Would you like to set the table then?”

“No,” Isabel merely states, burying her face in her arms before mumbling, “I don’t want to stand up. It feels nasty.”

Farlan and Levi share another look but neither of them says anything as they start to set the table. They eat their dinner in a persisting silence, after which Isabel curls up in her bed with her back turned towards them. With neither of them knowing what to say to her they soon wish her goodnight and settle in the bedroom, talking in hushed voices until falling asleep. Just before he drifts off, Levi thinks he can hear muffled sobbing coming from the kitchen, but when he stops to listen for it, all his ears pick up is Farlan’s quiet snoring.

By the following morning there is nothing muffled about it; Levi wakes to find Isabel doubled over on the bed, arms wrapped around herself and knees drawn close to her chest. Her sobs escape between hasty gasps for breath as she clutches the sheets in her fists, burying her face in them and pulling at her hair. Levi kneels by the bed and calls for Farlan who runs in, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“Jesus Christ,” he breathes, walking over to the bed and placing a hand on Isabel’s shoulder; she pulls away from the touch. “Why is she like this?”

“I don’t know,” Levi tells Farlan, his brows knitting as he looks at the girl. “Is this normal? Is this how it’s supposed to be?”

“I have no idea,” Farlan says, running his hands through his hair. “Oh, God. I have absolutely no idea. How are we supposed to help her if we don’t know what’s wrong with her?”

“Should I get Frau Gernhardt?” Levi suggests. “Or should we call a doctor?”

“Isabel,” Farlan tries to address her; the reply he gets is nothing but a whimper. “Isabel, darling, we want to help you. Tell us what you need. How can we help?”

“Just leave me alone,” she whispers from between her sobs, pressing her face more firmly into her pillow.

“Isabel,” Farlan tries again after giving Levi a concerned glance. “We really want to—”

“Just leave me alone!” she cries, turning to stare at them with her teary red eyes. “Just get out! Get out and leave me alone! I don’t want to see you, I want you to just go!”

They both stand up hesitantly and retreat back into the bedroom while Isabel curls up even more tightly on the bed, rocking herself back and forth and weeping. Levi closes the door behind them and sinks tiredly on to the bed as Farlan starts pacing nervously around the

room. He can hear Isabel humming quietly to herself, that same lullaby he's heard her sing before.

"This is really bad, Levi," Farlan huffs out. "Did you see the amount of pain she's in? What are we supposed to do?"

"I don't know," Levi admits again. "Erwin mentioned a doctor once, someone reliable. I can ask him about it today, see if we can buy her something for the pain."

"How much do you suppose that's going to cost?" Farlan asks him now.

"I don't know," Levi repeats, "but it doesn't really matter. We can't just leave her like this."

"You're right," the other man agrees, sighing. "She needs it more than we need the money."

By the time Levi leaves the apartment, Isabel has managed to calm down, accepting hot cups of tea and a bite to eat, even asking for a towel doused in hot water to place on her abdomen. It eases his mind some as he heads out the door and walks through the city, finally stopping in the entrance hall of the building as he hears Erwin's voice, muffled as it carries to the entry. He walks toward the short hallway off the ground floor, finding the man speaking on the telephone.

"I already told you I'm busy tonight," Erwin says quietly into the receiver, noticing Levi and giving him a smile and a nod before turning around. "No, I won't. Isn't it enough that I agreed to come to the party?"

Levi looks the man over as he waits for him to finish his call. He's dressed – hastily, it seems to Levi – in a pair of slacks and an undershirt and his wet, uncombed hair is dripping, leaving little markings on the fabric. Something about the fact he has already bathed makes Levi feel disappointed. He glances at the man's bare arms and remembers the moment in the communal bathroom, feeling shivers on the sensitive skin of his neck.

"It's only two weeks Lilian," Erwin tells the woman, sounding exasperated. "Because I'm busy with work. There's a war going on – not that it interests you, but the rest of us have to work so that–"

Even from where he's standing Levi can hear her shrill protests as Erwin moves the receiver further from his ear.

"Yes, fine, that was uncalled for," the man admits quietly. "I know all about how much you miss your husband. Lord knows you'd have nothing to do with me if you didn't."

Levi turns to lean on the wall and yawns, making Erwin glance quickly behind himself.

"I know," he sighs, running a hand through his hair and stretching his shoulders. "You can prove it to me then if you want. Of course I'm coming. Yes. I'll see you then."

He ends the call almost hurriedly, nodding for Levi to follow him up the stairs and into his apartment where he disappears into the bathroom before Levi has even managed to cross the threshold. He reappears a moment later with his hair neatly combed, pulling on a shirt.

“I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a rush,” he tells Levi before guiding him toward the kitchen. “I would have sent word to you and cancelled today, but I thought it best we have a word. Some important matters have come up.”

“You going somewhere?” Levi asks the man, getting started on the tea as Erwin snatches his swastika cufflinks from the table, fighting with them for a few seconds before resigning and handing them to Levi.

“I have dinner plans with Marie,” Erwin says. “What did you think of her? Did you like her?”

Levi shrugs. “I can’t say I really know her that well after spending five minutes with her,” he replies, securing the first of the cufflinks in place, all the while measuring Erwin’s thumb against his own in his mind.

“Of course,” Erwin says and laughs. “It was rather silly of me to even ask. She said she liked you very much, however.”

“Did she?” Levi mutters, fitting the second cufflink through and letting go of Erwin’s sleeve. “That’s nice of her.”

“No doubt she was just being honest,” Erwin says, smiling and readjusting his shirt. “Though she is also exceedingly kind.”

“I reckon she must be,” Levi voices, sitting down, “for you to like her so much.”

The sight of Erwin’s delighted expression is enough to make Levi’s heart swell in his chest. “You’re right,” the man says. “I do appreciate kindness in people, which in itself is enough to explain why I’m so partial to your company.”

Levi meets Erwin’s eyes for another few seconds before turning away and scratching at the back of his head. “So what was it that you wanted to talk about?” he asks, making the man sigh.

“I truly hope,” Erwin starts, sounding both amused and exasperated, “that one of these days I’m going to say something truthful yet flattering about you and you’re not going to utterly dismiss it. Then maybe you’ll see even a fraction of what I see when I look at you.”

Levi glances at Erwin and clears his throat. “I think I can hear the water boiling,” he states quietly before getting up and walking to the stove, hearing the man letting out a deep sigh behind him as he peers down at the pot; the surface of the water is barely shifting.

“They’ve found Schaumann’s body.”

Levi frowns as he turns to look at Erwin again. “That old man from our first mission?” he asks, and Erwin nods.

“It’s not surprising, the grave was rather shallow,” the man states, “but it presents us with an opportunity, in any case.”

“What kind of opportunity?” Levi asks now.

“If we play our cards right, someone else can be made to take the fall for it,” Erwin explains. “Someone who is known for having a strained relationship with Schaumann, and whom I’d personally rather see incarcerated until the end of the war to ensure he won’t have a chance to disappear.”

“What’s the mission?”

“It’ll be much like your first one in the Albertstadt, though in a much less risky environment,” the man says. “I’ll arrange some work for you at Lilian’s party in a couple of weeks to provide you with an opportunity to plant some documents in her husband’s study.”

“We’re framing Lilian’s husband?” Levi asks incredulously, frowning as Erwin simply nods. “With the documents you took before we left?”

“Yes,” Erwin replies. “I’ve been spying on him for years, but he’s outlived his usefulness.”

“I guess that means Lilian has too,” Levi mutters against his better judgement, cringing instantly at the pained expression on Erwin’s face.

“Yes, well,” the man sighs. “I’d like to think it was about more than just that. Like I said, I never meant to take it this far.”

“So what’s his problem with Schaumann?” Levi asks quickly to change the subject.

“Schaumann used to know Lilian,” Erwin explains, pinching the bridge of his nose as Levi moves the pot of water off the heat, “before she got married. He had a soft spot for actresses and showgirls. Lilian always said they were mere acquaintances but from the way Schaumann spoke of her it’s obvious one of them is lying.”

“Jealous husband,” Levi says and nods, pouring the hot water into a teapot. “Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“The party’s not for another two weeks, so we’ll have plenty of time to prepare,” Erwin states, sitting down as Levi places the cups and saucers on the table. “There was another thing I needed to tell you.”

“What’s that then?” Levi asks, carrying the pot over and taking a seat as well. “That nowadays whenever you have a bath you think about me?”

The words are out of Levi’s mouth before he knows it and though he tries to mask them with a hasty scoff, he can tell from glancing at Erwin the man has noticed the second of regret on Levi’s face. Neither of them speaks for an awkward moment that is full of the quiet gurgle made by Levi pouring the tea into the cups. Finally Erwin clears his throat.

“No, that’s not it,” he says slowly and Levi can hear the mirth in his voice. “Actually I wanted to tell you that Darlett wants to see you.”

Levi looks up at that, but turns his eyes back onto the tea as soon as he sees the smile on Erwin’s face. “What does he want?” Levi asks, feeling a troubling heat spreading onto his cheeks.

“All I know is that he requests your presence,” Erwin tells him.

“He ‘requests my presence’?” Levi repeats, snorting dismissively. “Who does he think he is? The king of England?”

“Only a very distant relative, I assure you,” Erwin responds with a laugh. “Whatever it is that he wants you for, I’ll know about it soon after you.”

“I suppose I do owe him one,” Levi mutters, sipping at his tea.

“You shouldn’t worry about Darlett,” Erwin tells him. “Whatever assistance he may require from you, there is no obligation that compels you to offer it.”

“So you think he wants my help with something?”

Erwin shrugs.

“We’ll both know more after you meet with him,” the man says, drinking his tea for a moment of silence before uttering, “So do you?”

“Do I what?” Levi asks him back, his eyes narrowing as he sees the hint of a smile on Erwin’s lips.

“Think about me when you have a bath?”

Levi grits his teeth as he notices the slight shaking of Erwin’s shoulders, feeling another wave of heat on his cheeks.

“Shut up,” he mutters into his cup of tea, making Erwin raise one of those bushy brows of his.

“I thought it was a completely reasonable question,” he tells Levi, his voice full of held-back laughter, “considering what you just—”

“And I thought I told you to shut your mouth,” Levi interrupts him sternly and Erwin laughs.

“Very well,” he surrenders. “I’ll say nothing more about it, but I doubt I’ll get the image of it out of my head now.”

“What goes on in your head is your business,” Levi tells him in a mumble as he drinks his tea, trying hard not to think of it himself.

“And what goes on in your mind is yours,” Erwin responds, like guessing Levi’s thoughts, pulling a folded-up piece of paper from his pocket. “Darlett’s address and when he’ll be expecting you.”

Levi clicks his tongue as he looks at the information. “It figures that’s where he would live,” he states sourly.

“Benefits of the job,” Erwin explains, “of which you can see I opted out myself.”

“I like this place,” Levi says, glancing around himself at the cupboards and papered walls, all of it slightly worn. “It’s comfortable.”

“I’m glad you like it,” the man tells him with a smile before emptying his cup. “I should finish getting ready. I don’t know how long I’ll be, so you shouldn’t feel obligated to wait, but of course you can stay for as long as you want and need.”

“There was something I wanted to ask you about,” Levi suddenly remembers, feeling a sting of guilt for not thinking about it before. “About the doctor you mentioned earlier.”

“Is everything alright?” Erwin asks immediately, his brows furrowing. “Has one of you fallen ill?”

“It’s not that exactly,” Levi replies, struggling again with his words. “It’s Isabel, she’s... going through something.”

“What is it?”

Levi sighs. “She’s gotten to the age when girls start to... well, bleed.”

“And she needs something for the pain?” Erwin asks at once, making Levi feel suddenly embarrassed of his lack of knowledge on the subject as he nods. “I can contact him, but I must warn you, pain medication is becoming very difficult to access. I can’t guarantee he will have any on supply, and even if he does he might not be willing to sell any for this purpose.”

“I understand,” Levi says, “but I have to try something. I can’t just stand by and do nothing.”

“I know,” Erwin says, standing up. “I’ll contact him and we’ll see where we stand.”

Levi nods and sips at his tea as the man makes to leave the room. “Do you need help with anything?”

Erwin shakes his head, pulling something out of his pocket and handing it to Levi; a few Reichsmarks and a small key. “If you leave before I come back, lock the door behind yourself,” he says as Levi nods, placing the key and the money on the table next to his cup of tea. “Take whatever food you want, and try not to overwork yourself.”

“Laundry day,” Levi tells him. “And heaven help me if they’re not properly folded the next time I come over.”

Erwin laughs, a low resonant sound that makes the hairs on Levi’s arms stand on end. “I promise to do my very best,” he says, “if you, in turn, promise to put your feet up for a moment tonight. Have a cup of tea. Have a—”

Levi watches as Erwin takes a moment to try and fight the smile off his face, finally yielding to the grin that looks only faintly apologetic.

“Have a bath,” the man finishes his sentence, earning a glare from Levi before heading out of the room and the apartment.

Levi spends the evening in the laundry room, scrubbing at sheets and clothes, turning the tips of his fingers pruney for hours before hanging everything to dry and heading back upstairs where he dusts and airs the rooms, sitting down for a cup of tea as the cool evening breeze starts shifting the curtains on the windows. In the lingering calm of the moment Levi considers Erwin's suggestion, imagines his body being enveloped by the womb-like warmth of the water, but the memory of that moment of privacy he had back home sullies the thought, makes it shameful and inappropriate. Something makes him think of the alternative, waiting here on the sofa until Erwin gets home, helping him out of that uniform again, watching his body shift in the water under Levi's touch. The thought is easier and more tempting but Levi rejects it too, packing up the food and returning home as the bells of the Frauenkirche ring out the half hour after eight.

When Levi finally gets home, he finds Isabel already asleep on her bed as he sneaks past her into the bedroom where Farlan is still awake, reading the book about botany that Isabel filched from the cottage. He sits up in the bed at the sight of Levi, leaning onto the headboard as Levi undresses and slips between the sheets.

"How did it go with her today?" Levi asks the man; the question seems to make him uncomfortable.

"Well..." Farlan starts, fumbling with the book for a moment before huffing, "Just promise me you won't get angry."

"What did you do?" Levi inquires sharply, making Farlan blush.

"You should have seen her," he says. "She was in so much pain and I just couldn't bare it so I went and I bought some moonshine from—"

"You got her drunk?" Levi interrupts him in an angry whisper.

"I didn't know what else to do, alright?" Farlan counters in a hiss. "She didn't drink much of it, just enough to take the edge off."

"Honestly," Levi breathes. "You know she's going to feel even worse tomorrow."

"So we'll get her drunk again," Farlan offers as a solution, making Levi roll his eyes. "What else would you have had me do? She was in agony, Levi."

"Erwin said he'll contact that doctor he knows," Levi responds sourly. "Hopefully we'll be able to buy something from him by the next time this happens."

They keep Isabel slightly under the influence for another two days after which she begins to feel better, or rather to feel less of the pain and more of the effects of the alcohol in her system. Farlan and Levi both assure her it's best to just try and sleep it off and she makes a good effort to, nodding off as often as she's able from vomiting and cursing them both to the lowest circle of hell. Levi manages to pass it off as a stomach flu to Frau Schultz who runs into him one time by the communal bathroom. It all reminds Levi of the first time he got

drunk like that; he must have been younger even than Isabel then, filching one of his uncle's bottles and forcing a quarter of it down before passing out on the bathroom floor. The following day Kenny made him clean the shop from floor to ceiling as a punishment that felt to Levi more than a little hypocritical considering the man's own past; after all, the first times Levi was forced to learn to feed himself were the mornings when Kenny was barely able to manage the distance between his bedroom and the toilet.

By the time Levi heads out to meet Darlett, Isabel is back to her old self, though it seems to Levi there's something compulsive about the way she refuses to talk about the subject whenever Levi or Farlan bring it up. As he walks through the city, Levi doesn't wonder what it is that makes her do that; there are so many things he doesn't like to talk about and he's sure the girl has just as many. It's simply a way to survive, ignoring the things that are too painful to speak of.

To Levi the building Darlett lives in looks much like the Gestapo headquarters; tall, showy and imposing. There's an elevator, a little golden cage Levi looks at hesitantly for a few seconds before turning to climb up the stairs to the fifth floor. There's a shiny brass knocker on the dark wooden door, but Levi uses his fist instead, cringing at the thought of fingerprints on the metal. The man answers the door dressed in his uniform, a black ceremonial one instead of the grey kind Levi's used to seeing on Erwin.

"At least you're not late," Darlett says as he steps aside to let Levi pass.

He walks into an entrance hall that's decorated with the kind of furniture Levi's seen in fancy shops as he's passed the windows; flimsy looking chairs, fine upholstery, polished wood, and despite the cleanness of it all Levi feels uncomfortable. He follows the man further inside the apartment, finally taking an offered seat on a heavily cushioned sofa in a sitting room that's been furnished with ornate little side tables and lamps with painted glass shades, with a large piano in the corner. Every surface looks clean enough to eat off and for a moment it eases Levi's nerves, until he notices the rifle leaning against the armchair on which Darlett now takes a seat.

"I think it best to get right to the matter at hand," the man says, lifting a slim folder off a side table and flipping through the papers within it disinterestedly. "I've been going through Erwin's report on you to decide on the best way for you to pay back that debt you owe me. I'm sure you're dying to demonstrate your appreciation, especially since it has taken you so inexcusably long to thank me."

"Don't hold your breath," he mutters, making Darlett sneer dismissively.

"Quite frankly it's a very uncomfortable read," he muses, peering down at the pages. "Reminds me of the sort of recommendation a man gives a servant who's caught him shagging a lady's maid. Or rather a recommendation a man gives the lady's maid, now that I think about it. Which, knowing Erwin, isn't far from the truth either."

Levi clicks his tongue but doesn't speak, feeling a pang of discomfort knowing there's a record of him, however flattering its contents. He wonders who it was meant for, who the people Erwin answers to are. He's never really considered the scope of the operation beyond

Darlett and Mike, and now that he's confronted with the information Levi isn't sure how he feels about it.

"Says here you're a skilled marksman," Darlett goes on, looking up from the papers to catch Levi's shrug.

"I hit the target once," Levi answers truthfully, guessing now what the rifle is for; it doesn't make him feel any better about any of this.

"Well, either you're being overly modest – which, considering your background, I would think appropriate – or Erwin is a liar," the man drawls, closing the folder and placing it back on the table. "You hit a man between the eyes and straight through the heart from a distance of ten odd metres? In the dark, no less?"

Levi shrugs again. "If that's what it says," he states sourly, remembering in a flash the young man's eyes as he stared at the sky, blood pouring from the wound on his chest.

Darlett scoffs. "I think not," he barely says, picking up the rifle and placing it on his lap in a manner that seems all too practised to Levi. "This is a Gewehr 43 rifle. Have you ever fired one of these?"

"No," Levi admits.

"Well, whatever your talents may or may not be, you're going to," Darlett tells him handing the gun over; it feels heavy in Levi's hands, so much so that he wonders whether he could hold it still for longer than a minute. "The task I have for you requires expert precision, and judging by how Erwin lauds you–"

"Erwin what?"

"Praises," Darlett clarifies with an exasperated sigh. "Judging by how Erwin praises you, you are just the man for the job."

"And if I refuse?" Levi asks, leaning the rifle against his thigh. "What if I say I'm grateful for what you did but that I want no part in this?"

"It was your choice to affiliate yourself with this operation," Darlett tells him sternly, "and whether you like it or not that makes me your superior officer. You should obey my command like the law."

"And if I don't?" Levi asks now. "What if I don't care about any of that army crap?"

Darlett mutters something in his own language, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is exactly why I told Erwin it was a bad idea to involve non-military personnel in this," he mutters. "Fine. If you require a further incentive so be it. Should you not partake in this mission, I will report back to central that Erwin's... involvement with you is compromising his ability to carry out his commission. And by involvement I do mean something beyond the range of normal fraternization between soldiers. As utterly distasteful as I find the subject."

“That’s not true,” Levi tries, though it sounds desperate even in his own ears. “Who says they’d believe you?”

“Oh, they would,” Darlett assures him, smiling unpleasantly. “There’s a significant blemish on Erwin’s record which would guarantee my success and I am not above using it to my advantage.”

Levi grits his teeth as his hand closes around the barrel of the gun and he wonders what it is about him and Erwin that seems to make everyone assume they’re sleeping together when in truth they’ve barely touched each other. It seems a high price to pay for a few times of helping each other get clean, all this suspicion and struggle to explain why they spend time together. The longer Levi spends not replying, the wider Darlett’s obnoxious smile gets until he breaks the silence.

“So it’s settled then,” the man tells him, sounding suddenly almost cheerful. “Erwin has already insisted on being included in any and all missions you’ll be carrying out and since I was never one to enjoy arguing with lunatics I’ve agreed to letting him assist you in whatever way he deems best.”

“So who am I supposed to use this on?” Levi asks, lifting the rifle a little as Darlett utters a dry laugh.

“No one who doesn’t deserve it,” Darlett barely says. “In fact considering what he’s done you’d probably want him dead more than I do.”

“No doubt,” Levi mutters as Darlett extends his hand to take back the rifle.

“I don’t have time to explain everything to you. You can address any further questions to Erwin,” the man says, placing the gun back where it was. “He’ll take you up to the cottage and teach you how to use it. And while you’re there, try to hit something with a pulse. Anything you kill in those woods is a lot more innocent than the beast you’re about to put down, believe me.”

“I can’t just—”

A sound of a key turning in a lock carries in from the entrance and Darlett lifts his hand to silence Levi’s protests, making him grit his teeth again instead. He can hear three people entering and footsteps clicking their way toward the sitting room. Levi thinks there’s something strange about the sound, but he doesn’t realise what it is until a little girl appears in the doorway; she’s wearing a red dress with white knee-high socks and shoes made of shiny black leather and her reddish hair falls around her small face in ringlets that look feather-soft to Levi who can’t help staring at the child with a frown. For an odd moment she stares back before noticing Darlett, her confused expression turning into a delighted smile.

“Papa!” she screams wildly, running across the room and leaping onto the man’s lap, laughing as he hugs her close to his chest and kisses her cheek.

“Hello my sweetling!” he says, kissing her cheek again and standing her up on his thighs. “Did you have fun with mummy and Renata at the park?”

“We saw a duck!” she tells him excitedly, her little feet tapping wildly as Darlett holds her up from under her arms.

“Did you?” he asks her, feigning the same level of excitement and smiling when she nods. “Did you feed it the rest of your lunch?”

“Yup,” she confirms, smirking in a way that reminds Levi of Darlett’s own obnoxious smile. “It was a yucky sandwich.”

“Now, now, Lotte,” Darlett says, sounding suddenly stern. “Don’t say bad things about mummy’s cooking. She’s doing the best she can, you know.”

“I know,” she whispers, giggling breathlessly as he lifts her up, straightening his arms for a few seconds before putting her back down on the floor again.

“Now run along and wash your hands,” the man commands her, standing up as she skips across the room and runs past a tall, blonde woman at the door.

“Erik,” she says in a strained voice, casting a wary glance at Levi before walking over to Darlett. “I’ve told you not to leave your guns lying around the house.”

“I’m sorry, darling,” Darlett replies, giving the woman a kiss on the cheek. “I was cleaning it and forgot. I’ll lock it up in a moment.”

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” she says, turning suddenly to Levi who struggles to get to his feet.

“This is Weller,” Darlett makes the introductions and Levi shakes the woman’s hand. “He’s Holtz’s housekeeper.”

“Oh, yes, Erik has mentioned you. Hello,” she tells Levi with a smile. “Lovely to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Levi mutters, bowing a little though he doesn’t know why.

“I heard you had some kind of a misunderstanding with the police,” she goes on. “It must have been awfully frightening for you.”

“Yes,” Levi barely says, glancing at Darlett who steps closer.

“Weller was just delivering some papers for me,” he puts in, “and we mustn’t keep him while he’s working.”

“Of course not, I’m sorry,” the woman agrees and apologises. “I didn’t mean to take up any of your time. It was wonderful to meet you.”

“You too,” Levi manages before Darlett ushers him out of the apartment.

Though Levi has more than a few questions about the whole thing – not least of all Darlett's family – he puts them aside during his visits to Erwin the following week while they plan the details regarding the upcoming mission at Lilian's party. Erwin has convinced her to allow Levi to help with doing dishes and cleaning and things, making up some lie or other no doubt to justify the uncharacteristic act of decency. He draws Levi detailed maps of the house, outlining the routes to the study and back while coming up with credible explanations should someone see him.

"I could always just say I was looking for the bathroom," Levi suggests once, but Erwin shakes his head.

"The staff have their own facilities downstairs," he states, making Levi shrug.

"I could say it was occupied and I really needed to take a shit," he says and Erwin sighs.

"I suppose *you* could always say that," he responds as Levi utters a quiet laugh.

He arrives at the house several hours before Erwin with the papers the man took from Schaumann's folded neatly in the pocket of his trousers. He enters through the back and is guided quickly to Lilian's housekeeper, a stocky, middle aged woman with greying blond hair and a sour expression.

"I honestly don't know what you're doing here," she says as her first words to Levi. "We've always managed without extra help before."

Levi shrugs. "All I know is that I was told to be here," he responds, meeting her irritation with an equal amount of impassiveness. "I couldn't tell you why even if I wanted to."

"No, I guess not," she huffs, holding her hands on her hips for a moment before letting out a resigned sigh. "Well I guess you might as well get started on those glasses there. There's not to be one blemish on them, so wear these gloves when you wash them."

She hands Levi a pair of white cotton gloves and he pulls them on before getting to work, spending what feels like several hours cleaning and rinsing what he estimates are five dozen champagne glasses, holding them out against the light to check for stains left behind by drops of water and rubbing at the markings until they all pass the housekeeper's inspection. She gives him a curt nod as a reply as the rooms beyond the kitchen start to fill with noise, though Levi can barely hear it over the hubbub of everything that's going on around him; there are people carrying food on trays, calling out not to run into each other, there are oven doors opening and closing and cream being piped onto biscuits.

"You can start filling the glasses now and putting them on trays," the housekeeper tells him, showing him a collection of crates filled with large green bottles in the corner of the pantry. "One bottle at a time, can't risk leaving them on the table, and you bring each empty bottle back here to be counted later. Never fill the glasses to the brim, but don't make the hostess look stingy either. Seven glasses per tray, no more, no less."

As Levi starts prying open the first of the bottles he quickly decides this is the least thrilling mission he has ever been on and though he wished the previous times to be as uneventful as

possible, Levi can't help feeling a little disappointed and bored. Cleaning the glasses was one thing, calming and satisfying in its own way, but filling them gets quickly monotonous to the point where Levi grows deaf and blind to everything else around him, even forgetting for a moment what he is really there to accomplish. Soon the trays start to disappear at a faster rate than he manages to fill them, forcing him to pick up his pace.

"They're going to start coming back soon so you need to move faster," the housekeeper tells Levi as the last of the trays gets picked up by a waiter in a suit. "As the glasses come in you wash them, rinse them and set them on those towels to dry. Every one you break is off your salary, so be careful with them. Refill them as needed when you're told to."

"Yes, sir," Levi mutters under his breath as he turns sourly back to the sink as the first tray of empty glasses lands on the counter.

Levi quickly loses count on how many trays have gone out and come back in, how many champagne bottles he's opened, how many glasses he's inspected for stains and how many hours he's spent on his feet running between the pantry and his spot by the sink. Somewhere in the back of his mind he's imagining Erwin in his uniform laughing at jokes and enjoying the food, drinking glass after glass of the liquor Levi pours out so carefully that his back starts aching from the way he needs to crouch down to measure the appropriate amount with his eyes; the image makes him grit his teeth against the realisation that life has again made him get the shitty end of the stick.

Little by little the stream of champagne starts to dry up and the papers begin to burn a hole in Levi's pocket. He tries to glance around himself to see a clock on the wall but finds none, feeling a drop of sweat falling down his temple as he wonders what stages the party is at. It seems most of the food has gone out; there are empty trays littering most surfaces, no doubt waiting for Levi to be done with the glasses. Realising he probably doesn't have much time left, Levi walks up to the housekeeper and asks to take a break.

"Your first one for the night?" she asks him back and Levi nods as she glances at the tower of clean glasses in the corner of the counter. "You have ten minutes."

Levi thanks her curtly before crossing the room and entering the hallway at the end of which he has seen the toilet, taking a turn to the right and through a door into the servants' stairwell leading up the second floor. He walks up the steps quickly but quietly, listening for voices through the thrum of silence around him before emerging into a corridor with wood panelled walls and a long Persian-style rug on a polished floor. Levi finds the study without effort, following Erwin's directions in marching to the desk and pulling open the bottom-most drawer, sticking the papers from his pocket between a thick wad of other files and documents.

Just as he stands up to leave, Levi begins to make out voices approaching the study, hushed but clearly in the middle of an argument. Without knowing what to do he hovers by the desk, waiting to see if the people outside will pass, hissing a swear and slipping under the desk as he sees someone pressing the handle. He barely manages to pull the chair further to cover him as the people enter the room, one of them turning on a small lamp that leaves Levi's hiding place bathing in shadows.

“I don’t understand what’s brought this on,” Levi hears Lilian say, a note of desperation in her voice. “You never minded any of this before. You never cared that I’m married.”

“It’s not that,” Erwin replies, that rough pitch that’s not his own making Levi’s breath hitch in his throat; he doesn’t want to hear this.

“What is it then?” she asks; Levi can hear her soft footsteps on the floor. “Darling…”

Erwin sighs, a short puff of air that seems to be indicative of irritation rather than anything else. “I don’t know why you think it matters,” he says, sounding almost angry. “I’ll be leaving in a couple of months. It’s not as if this could last even if I weren’t.”

“But don’t you…” Lilian starts, her words trailing off for a moment. “Wouldn’t you rather make the most of the time we do have left? Have a bit more of what we had before?”

“What we had before,” Erwin utters; there’s something scornful in his tone. “And what is that exactly? One night every couple of months during which you talk more about your husband than anything else?”

“Erwin–”

“No,” he tells her sternly as Levi tries to shift further from the pool of light by the desk. “I want nothing more to do with that.”

“But darling,” she coos at him softly. “I’ve told you before, what Wolfgang and I have is–”

“What you and your husband have? Don’t make me laugh,” Erwin interrupts her again. “All this time that he’s been gone, do you honestly think he’s stayed faithful to you? Do you honestly think he’s not been pigging his way through Europe, looking under the skirt of every dancing girl that catches his eye? You know how hard those old habits are to break, don’t you, Lilian?”

“How fucking *dare* you throw that in my face?” Lilian spits at him, the softness of her voice suddenly gone. “My husband–”

“Is no better a person than you are,” Erwin tells her, his voice full of poison. “You two deserve each other, and I want nothing more to do with either of you.”

“Oh,” she breathes, sounding mocking. “Did I break your poor little heart, Erwin? Does it break your heart that I won’t leave my husband who has given me everything I could ever dream of for some useless cheapskate who in ten years has barely managed to get promoted to Sturmbannführer in the Personalhauptamt? Who does nothing all day but files papers like a glorified secretary–”

Erwin laughs, a terrible, gut-wrenching sound that makes Levi hold his breath. “Better a glorified secretary than a prostitute dressed as a dancer,” he whispers, creating a silence that seems to go on for minutes.

“Get out,” Lilian finally says, her voice low and dangerous. “I want you out of my house right now.”

Levi hears the heavy footsteps and the door opening as the man leaves the room, realising should the man go looking for him in the kitchen he would be nowhere to be found. He feels like swearing under his breath as he tries to move soundlessly under the desk, but the room is filled with a silence that is too deep to break. He can hear Lilian breathing, her heavy exhales growing steadier and steadier until there's a soft rustling sound before the lights go out and the door closes, leaving Levi alone in the room that now seems pitch black to his eyes.

After waiting ten seconds he finally clambers out from under the desk, rushing quietly to the door and opening it enough to peer through the crack at the empty hallway before slipping out and running to the servants' stairwell; he can hear Erwin's voice carrying up from the kitchen before he's halfway down. Wishing that the toilet is unoccupied, Levi sneaks into the corridor, hoping to look like he's just finished taking a long shit. Hearing Erwin calling out for him again Levi hurries along, feeling everyone's eyes on him when he steps into the room.

"Yes, Herr Sturmbannführer?" he asks, trying to look as surprised as everyone else about the man's presence in the servants' quarters.

"Where the fuck have you been?" Erwin barks at him, making the housekeeper tut her disapproval. "Never mind that. We're leaving."

"But sir." Levi thinks it best to protest. "I haven't finished my—"

"I don't give a fuck," Erwin tells him, nearly shouting. "Come on, we'll use the back door. Those bastards have had enough of a show for one night."

"Yes, Herr Sturmbannführer," Levi agrees, hastily handing the housekeeper his white cotton gloves before running out the door after Erwin, circling the house and getting on the back seat of a car just as Erwin starts the engine.

They've only driven a kilometre or so before the man suddenly stops and turns to look at Levi through the rear-view mirror. "I know you've had a long day," he starts, sounding tired and ashamed, "but I'd much appreciate it if you could come home with me. Not to spend the night, you understand, but—"

"Yes," Levi barely tells him. "Just drive."

He can just make out Erwin's relieved sigh over the roar of the engine as he turns the key in the ignition and turns back on the road, driving through the quiet, empty city; it must be past midnight. Levi feels a pang of guilt, thinking about Farlan and Isabel, but they know not to worry should he be long; he told them not to expect the worst should he be late, or stay the night. He considers the latter, but doesn't know what he wants.

"I heard it," Levi tells Erwin who glances at him through the mirror again. "You and Lilian. I was under the desk."

Levi can hear Erwin whispering something, but doesn't understand the words. "You were?" the man asks back and Levi nods.

“Bad timing,” he mutters and Erwin agrees.

“You know I didn’t have a—”

“I know,” Levi assures him, finishing the sentence in his mind, wondering how to ease that mountain of guilt the man has piled on himself.

“I just couldn’t,” Erwin mutters, words Levi can barely hear over the humming of the car. “It’s getting so exhausting.”

Levi makes sure Erwin catches his nod in the mirror before they both fall silent for the remainder of the short journey. The man parks the car by the building, leading Levi up to his apartment where he walks straight out of sight and into the kitchen, returning with a bottle of liquor and two glasses. He fills them both and empties his own while Levi still hovers by the door, accepting the drink gratefully though the taste of it is as terrible as Farlan’s moonshine’s, wondering what he’s supposed to do and wishing he were like Marie, able to make the man smile just by standing there and calling him his commander.

“Please,” he hears Erwin say and looks up at his face, the remorse and sadness of his expression making Levi ache. “Do that thing you do.”

Levi clings to these words with everything he’s got as he feels relief filling his mind again. He clutches Erwin’s wrist and pulls him into the bathroom, taking the bottle and glass from him and laying them in the sink before turning back to Erwin. Levi lets his hands grow gentle, softer than they were before as he pulls loose the man’s tie and unbuttons his shirt, glancing up at his face every now and again; he’s staring at Levi, following his fingers, following his every move as Levi runs his hands across his shoulders, frowning at the sight of all that bare skin as the shirt and jacket fall down on the floor. He unbuckles the belt, feeling the instinct to get on his knees but resisting, sliding his hands under the waist of the trousers and underwear, watching the fabric pool down at Erwin’s ankles. The man pulls off his boots before standing in front of Levi, semi-erect and perfectly proportioned as Levi gets on tiptoes to knock the hat off his head, running his fingers through the coarse blond hair.

“This is you,” he reminds Erwin who nods, his expression serious and his eyes glued on Levi’s.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

Levi bears the intensity of the moment for another ten seconds before his gaze finds the floor and he turns away though he knows what he wants. He walks over to the bathtub, hearing the soft clinking sounds that tell him Erwin is filling his glass again before the sound of the running water drowns them out. While the tub fills, Levi gathers his supplies, emptying his own glass after another glance at Erwin’s naked figure as he steps into the bath; the liquor seems to help and he asks for a refill, drinking it quickly as he takes a seat on the little stool behind Erwin.

“Thank you,” the man says again as Levi rubs lather onto the small towel and runs it across his broad shoulders. “This helps me more than you know.”

Levi can feel his heart growing full and whole for this one moment of knowing he can help, of knowing he has erased some of that pain, no matter how small a part. "I'm happy to do it," he tells the man truthfully, moving the towel over to Erwin's neck, savouring the groan it tempts out.

"I just wish..." Erwin starts, taking a sip of his drink before continuing. "I just wish I knew what you want. Sometimes."

"What do you mean by that?" Levi asks him, frowning at the shrug he gets as a response.

"Just that I wish," Erwin says again, "that I knew how to help you like you help me."

Levi falls quiet, stunned into silence by the man's words. How could it be that all this time when he's been growing more and more grateful to Erwin for everything he has done for him, and struggling daily with his own inability to give the man even a fraction of it back Erwin has been thinking this, that it is Levi who is there for him and not the other way around? How could the man not see that he has given Levi back everything he has lost, his name, his life, every piece of who he is?

"You do," Levi barely whispers, his voice breaking; it's all he knows how to say.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- masturbation

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

First of all, a word about the update schedule:

As some of you may have noticed, I have now uploaded two of the recent chapters a day or two late, which has led me to make the decision to start updating the fic once every three weeks from now on until further notice. It's to make sure I won't have to rush the chapters to get them done on time and to give myself more time to focus on other things in my life as well. Thus the next update will fall on March 11th.

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WARNINGS AT THE END

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi stretches out his body under the covers, listening to the quiet sounds of Isabel and Farlan's conversation, muffled by the closed door between the bedroom and the kitchen. He's slept late – it's clear from the abundance of light pouring in from behind the curtain drawn across the window – and though he's never made a habit of it, it's hardly surprising this time, considering how late it was when he finally got to bed. By the time he had managed to get Erwin into his, the effects of the alcohol were strong enough to force him to lie down on the sofa to catch a few hours of sleep before heading out and through the city, near soundless in its early morning slumber.

Levi folds his arm under his head and breathes deeply, scratching at that patch of hair below his navel under the waistband of his underwear before relaxing his hand, the tips of his fingers brushing against his morning hardness; its half-heartedness reminds him of Erwin and the way he stood naked in front of Levi in the dim light of the bathroom, interested but not inappropriately so, never after that time by the banks of the river. How anyone can be polite to that extreme Levi doesn't know, but he appreciates it in Erwin nonetheless, even more so when he thinks of his own lapses, the way his body has responded in the past to the sight of Erwin, and the way he has imagined the man when they've not been together. Levi touches himself gently, lost in those thoughts for a moment until a loud wailing of sirens in the distance brings him back to the present.

"Shit," he swears under his breath as he sits up, drawing the covers on himself just as Farlan stumbles into the room.

"Good, you're up," the man says, drying his hands on a towel. "You'll follow with Isabel?"

Levi nods as Farlan turns away and hurries out of the apartment and into the stairwell where the cacophony of footsteps and shouts is already growing louder. Levi pushes himself quickly

out of bed and into a pair of trousers, still pulling on his shirt as he meets Isabel at the door. She's holding their blankets and quilts in her arms, already familiar with the procedure.

"You've got everything?" Levi asks her nonetheless, getting back a curt nod.

They follow their neighbours into the basement where the howling of the sirens grows fainter, ever more so after Farlan closes the heavy metal door behind himself before joining Levi and Isabel on their usual spot on the floor. The routine murmur of conversation starts to fill the stuffy little room, and to Levi it seems to grow louder after every one of these false alarms, like every time those sirens blare out in vain they all believe in their warning a little less instead of a little more. It's a fairly common complaint these days, how the air raids are becoming an inconvenience, though during moments like these no one says a word about it, and Levi can still observe people being vigilant, listening for those bombs in the distance, though that rumble of explosions is again nowhere to be heard.

"Looks like it's another false alarm," Farlan voices Levi's thoughts, leaning against the wall and sighing.

"Looks like it," Levi agrees, glancing around himself at their neighbours; Frau Schultz's daughter has come for a visit with her son, who has quickly found his way to the company of Hanna and Bruno while the adults keep up a quiet conversation, shushing the children every once in a while when they get too rowdy. Both Frau Schultz and her daughter look upset, their eyes red as if from crying, and when Levi nods a hello to them, neither of them responds.

"Well, I suppose that's better than the alternative," Farlan huffs, "though I worry that people will stop taking this seriously."

"The more refugees come into the city, the better they'll remember," Levi tells him quietly, turning his eyes away from the two women. "Or who knows? Maybe none of us will have to. Maybe all we'll get are false alarms."

"I really hope so," the other man states. "Even this is terrible enough. I can't even imagine the other option."

"I don't think anyone can really," Levi says, glancing again at Frau Schultz who is drying her eyes with a handkerchief. "What's that all about?"

"Her son," Farlan replies in a whisper that's even more quiet than Levi's. "He died. Apparently she found out a few days ago."

Levi nods, but doesn't know what to say, not even when he runs into the woman on the third floor landing where she has stopped to wait for her grandson. It seems his attempts at finding the right words would not have been welcome in the first place; as soon as their eyes meet again, Frau Schultz clutches her grandson's arm and pulls the child away so forcefully that he lets out a whiny yelp.

"Was I just imagining it," Levi starts as soon as they're all around the kitchen table, "or was Frau Schultz—"

“No,” Isabel tells him instantly. “She’s upset with both of you. I heard her talking with Frau Gernhardt.”

“Why is she upset with us?” Farlan asks, frowning. “Did we do something to insult her?”

“No,” Isabel says again, “but she thinks you two should be out there fighting like her son was, and it’s because of people like you that the war isn’t going as well as it was before.”

Farlan gives Levi a hasty look. “Do you think she’ll be trouble?”

Levi shrugs. “The worse the war goes, the more people will think that,” he says, keeping his tone casual not to alarm either of them. “We knew it was a possibility, didn’t we? Besides, who knows how many of them have been saying that behind our backs, and for how long? All we can do for now is hope that the jump from saying things to doing something about them is too much for Frau Schultz to bother with.”

“Has Erwin said anything about the war lately?” Farlan asks him now.

“Nothing in particular, but I haven’t asked either,” Levi replies, remembering suddenly a fragment of a conversation from the previous night. “He’s been talking about the cottage.”

“What about it?”

“Just that he likes to go up there before the winter,” Levi explains, a lie they constructed together, “to make sure everything is in order, and to hunt. He’s thinking about going again soon, and he wants me to go help him get everything ready, but I said it depends on the two of you.”

“Go to the cottage again?” Isabel asks, her face lighting up with excitement. “Could we, big brother?”

Levi shrugs again. “If you want,” he says. “It was fun the first time, though I don’t think we’ll go swimming now.”

“Farlan!” Isabel exclaims, turning to the other man. “Can we go? Please?”

Farlan looks over the table at Levi, frowning and leaning his chin on his palm. “Are you sure you wouldn’t rather go by yourselves?” he asks, making Isabel gasp. “After all, it might be the only chance you’ll get to—”

“Last time I told Erwin I’m not going without you two because I didn’t feel comfortable leaving you behind,” Levi reminds the man, “and it’s not any different now. Our situation is still the same. I’ll be happier having you both where I can keep an eye on you.”

Farlan studies his expression for a long moment during which Isabel seems barely able to breathe, before sighing and nodding. “It’s not the most flattering invitation I’ve ever gotten,” he mutters, “but if you’re sure you’d rather have us there—”

“Are we going or not?” Isabel interrupts him, her expression changing from sullen to excited with Farlan’s nod.

“Do you know when yet?” he asks Levi who shakes his head.

“As soon as Erwin can get away,” he replies as Isabel dances across the kitchen and throws herself down onto her bed.

“Just so you know,” Farlan tells Levi when they’re lying in theirs that night, “if the situation was reversed there is no way I would take you and Isabel with me.”

“Like I said,” Levi says, sighing, “I’ll feel better being able to look after you two.”

“What do you fear will happen while you’re gone?” Farlan asks him now. “And besides, even if something did happen, how would you being here help? Would you fight off the Gestapo if they showed up at the door in the middle of the night?”

“I don’t know,” Levi huffs, growing irritated. “How do you imagine I’d be able to live with myself after?”

“Fine,” Farlan finally gives up, drawing the covers closer to his chin. “It’s none of my business anyway, how you handle yourself.”

“No, it isn’t,” Levi agrees, turning on his side and closing his eyes as Farlan turns off the light.

In the quiet darkness of the room Levi’s thoughts turn quickly to the alternative despite his resistance and he cringes at the image his mind now paints; him and Erwin, sitting on the steps of the cottage with mugs in hand, hot tea steaming in the cool autumn air that would turn their noses red and their toes numb. They’d light fires in the hearths to keep warm, heat water for baths that would feel even better after the cold of the rooms, all the while being able to talk about anything, ask each other anything, act however they wanted around one another. They’d go out and practise with the rifle – it’s the reason for the trip, after all – and later they could talk about the mission, the dangers and pitfalls and gains, and how Levi feels about it, preparing to take a life. They would have time to tell each other about themselves, Levi could ask about Erwin’s past – all the questions still piling up in the back of his mind that make him feel frustrated when they make themselves known – but something in Levi’s stomach clenches at the thought.

He shakes his head at this, dispelling the image and replacing it with a new one, of Farlan and Isabel lying on the sofa, reading their books and chatting with Erwin, feeling safe and happy and free. It will still be great, Levi decides and the knot in his stomach loosens. They’ll all be safe with Erwin around, just like last time, just like Levi planned from the beginning.

It takes Erwin another two weeks to be able to leave the city and though he doesn’t say why – or perhaps exactly because of it – Levi assumes it has more to do with Osterhaus than his work in the Personalhauptamt. It’s something that draws dark circles under the man’s eyes and makes him smile too quickly when he catches Levi studying his movements, brows knitted tightly and arms crossed in signs of discontent. Whenever Levi tries to bring up the subject, Erwin reminds him of his earlier words, that the best way for Levi to help him is to

stay as far away from the matter as possible; it forces Levi silent, frustrated and concerned but obedient to Erwin's wishes even when doing so makes him ache.

When Levi comes home on Thursday evening, having helped Erwin pack his things for the trip, he finds Isabel curled up in her bed, knees drawn close to her chest, gasping for breath as Farlan strokes her hair and whispers soothing things to her, though it's not clear whether she hears any of it over her own panting breathing. Farlan looks up as Levi walks in, nodding his head toward the sitting room and following Levi there.

"Has it been a month already?" Levi asks him in a whisper.

"And a few days," Farlan replies. "Has Erwin been able to contact the doctor yet?"

Levi shakes his head. "He's been trying for weeks but no one seems to know where he is," he mutters before swearing under his breath. "What are we supposed to do? Get her drunk again?"

"I don't know," Farlan admits, "but I don't think her going anywhere like this is a good idea."

Levi remembers the cottage in a flash and swears more loudly, realising the truth in Farlan's words and thinking about cancelling, knowing were the trip for any other reason he wouldn't hesitate for a second. He knows Erwin will never go for it, him attempting the mission without knowledge of the rifle, without a full day's practice to rely on when the day comes. He glances back toward the kitchen and swears again.

"Maybe if we just..." he starts, his words trailing off. "If we buy some more moonshine maybe she could--"

"Come on, Levi," Farlan huffs. "Have you any idea how suspicious that would look, three grown men in the same car with a young girl drunk off her mind? Do you honestly think we'd get anywhere near the cottage without someone stopping us?"

"She could pretend--"

"No," Farlan states instantly. "You can't ask that of her, it's not right. She can barely sit up and you want to drag her halfway across the country just so you can have some peace of mind?"

"I have to go," Levi insists, wishing again he could tell Farlan everything, the real reason, or anything that wouldn't make it sound like he's putting someone else's needs before Farlan and Isabel's. "I promised Erwin I'd help him."

"You do whatever feels best to you," Farlan tells him, "but Isabel stays here and that's final. This is terrible enough as it is for her."

"She'll be so disappointed," Levi remarks, making Farlan sigh. "She was really looking forward to this."

"I know," Farlan says, "but it's not as if she'd be able to enjoy herself. At the end of the day it's better for her to lie in her own bed than on the back seat of Erwin's car. Besides, I'd

imagine she's better off handling the hygiene side of things somewhere with an indoor toilet."

Levi nods and sighs. "What should I do?" he asks Farlan who shrugs.

"If it were me, I'd go," he says, pausing for a moment before continuing, "It's not like it was last time. I can take care of her now, Levi."

Levi considers the words, staying quiet for long enough to make Farlan grow irritated.

"I'm under no illusions about what I was like before," the man states, his voice hurt and angry, "but quite frankly I'm insulted by how little you still trust me."

"It's not about that," Levi insists, though he's not sure he means what he says. "I just... She's my responsibility."

"*We* decided to take her in," Farlan reminds him. "It was a decision we made *together*, Levi. That means she's *our* responsibility, not yours."

"You're both my responsibility," Levi mutters as Farlan scoffs.

"Yes, and you and Isabel are mine," he states matter-of-factly. "How many times do I have to tell you? We're all in this together."

"I know that, but—"

"Which means you'll have to learn to trust us too," Farlan interrupts him, raising his voice. "I don't care if you have to feel like the head of this household, keep that if it means so much to you, but that doesn't mean you can't ever think of yourself, Levi."

"It's not important to me to feel like—"

"I'm not finished," Farlan tells him sternly, raising his hand to cut him off. "Like I said, I know what I've been like in the past, and I don't blame you if you don't feel like you can trust me to take care of Isabel. But you can't keep living like this, Levi. It's eating away at you, trying to take care of everything and everyone."

"I'm fine," Levi insists, gritting his teeth. "I don't mind taking care of you."

"I don't mind it either," Farlan says, crossing his arms over his chest. "I can handle things here you know. I've been doing it for weeks while you've been with Erwin."

"I don't spend that much time—"

"I didn't mean it like that," Farlan interrupts him again. "All I meant was that this is my home as much as it is yours, and I can take care of it and the people in it as well as you can. And besides, Erwin's paying you for the work this weekend, isn't he?"

Levi hasn't even considered it and all he can do is shrug and mutter, "I suppose."

“So think of it this way,” Farlan tells him, smiling now as he puts his hands on Levi’s shoulders. “You go with Erwin to the cottage and earn the money to feed us and I’ll stay at home and take care of Isabel.”

“Like my very own housewife,” Levi mutters, making Farlan shudder.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he says, “but please, don’t ever say that again.”

Levi lets out a laugh, but grows serious again mere seconds later. “What if something happens?” he asks the other man. “What if Frau Schultz has talked to someone? What if—”

“What if there’s an air raid and the whole city will be gone by the time you come back?” Farlan asks him. “What if there’s a fire that burns the whole building to the ground? What if while you’re at the cottage British soldiers parachute down from the sky and kill you in your sleep?” The man shakes his head. “We could play this game all day, Levi. You know that.”

Levi sighs. “I know,” he admits, thinking about all the possibilities, all the dangers in the world, wondering whether this weekend means he’s about to become one of them.

Despite spending the rest of the night convincing himself that he’s made his peace with the whole thing, Levi feels a pang of guilt when he finally kneels by Isabel’s bed the following afternoon to say goodbye, facing her downhearted expression with a worried frown.

“I wish you could come with me,” he tells her quietly, placing his hand on her head a touch awkwardly. “I’m sorry it got ruined.”

Isabel heaves a heavy sigh but doesn’t speak until Levi is already at the door when he can hear her muttering, “Bye, big brother,” to his back before burying her face into her pillow.

As he walks down the stone steps to the car where Erwin is waiting, Levi feels that knot in his stomach again, and as he steps out of the building and sees the man leaning onto the car and smoking, he can feel his breath hitching in his throat. Levi recognises the feeling distantly, without understanding why he’s feeling it: he’s nervous. It seems ridiculous now after they’ve spent so much time together and grown so close, but Levi can’t ignore the clamminess of his hands when he pulls open the car door to throw his bag onto the back seat.

“Farlan and Isabel aren’t coming,” he tells Erwin quietly as the man drops his cigarette, putting it out with the sole of his boot. “Bad timing.”

“How unfortunate,” Erwin says, getting in the car as Levi does the same. “I’m sure she was looking forward to it.”

“She was,” Levi admits and sighs, still feeling the nerves as a tightness in his chest. “Though considering what we’re really going there for it might not be the worst thing, them not coming along.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Erwin replies, turning the key in the ignition and making the engine roar into life. “Now we’ll be able to start the preliminary plans for the mission.”

Levi nods and falls quiet as they drive to the end of the street and make a turn, and for the first time during his acquaintance with Erwin the silence between them doesn't feel comfortable. It seems to be full of the things they're not saying about all the reasons why it's better for them to go by themselves, all the possibilities now open for examination. Levi considers some of them in passing, his stomach clenching again almost painfully at the images of himself enjoying Erwin's company in every way a person can.

"How's the weather supposed to be?" Levi asks to dispel the quiet.

"It might rain on Sunday," Erwin answers, "but otherwise it's supposed to be lovely – quite warm even."

"Good," Levi says and sighs. "Means I won't have to lie around in a pile of mud when we go out to practise."

Erwin utters a laugh. "I'm sure that would have been terrible for you," he says, "being so curiously careful about that sort of thing."

"I don't understand that," Levi comments, huffing a little. "What's so curious about not wanting to be covered in shit all the time? It's just common sense."

"You're right," Erwin admits, laughing again. "We should all learn from you, Herr Housekeeper."

"Now you're just mocking me," Levi accuses, making Erwin assume an expression of total innocence.

"I wouldn't dare," he tells Levi as he turns onto the road leading away from the city centre, a smile tugging on his lips.

Levi clicks his tongue and leans back in his seat, staring out of the window at the buildings blurring with the speed Erwin's keeping. As he takes a deep breath Levi can smell the cigarette smoke that clings to the man and it makes him want to speak out again, but he can't think of anything to say.

"I hope you'll be able to enjoy yourself," Erwin suddenly breaks the silence, like in reply to Levi's thoughts. "I know your last visit ended very badly."

In truth Levi has barely considered it, the incident with the soldiers by the river. It seems something has made him move past that and remember the good things about the cottage: the peace and quiet, the abundance of nature, the way it made Erwin more relaxed and more himself.

"Don't worry," Levi tells the man. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Good," Erwin says, sounding relieved. "I thought we'd go out early tomorrow and hunt some hares."

"Why hares?"

“It’s good for target practice,” the man explains as they start to leave the city behind. “The best shot is to the head, but it takes more skill. In addition to that, hares are fast and you have to hunt for them in the dark, all of which is good for training.”

Levi nods, though something about it all bothers him. “I’ve been thinking...” he starts, making Erwin give him a curious glance. “You told Darlett I’m good with a gun, but I’ve not really ever used one save for that one time. What if that time by the tracks was just beginner’s luck or something?”

“In theory I suppose it could have been,” Erwin admits, “but I don’t believe that. I think you have all the qualities of a great sharpshooter – a stable disposition, cool nerves and something that allows you to keep your distance from your target.”

Levi considers the words, but finds he can’t assess them this way or that; when it comes to his own character, he’s always been the worst judge. “For both our sakes I hope you’re right,” he mutters and Erwin laughs.

“I suppose we’ll see tomorrow,” he muses, though it seems to Levi he doesn’t doubt it for a second.

They drive along the same roads as before, stopping at the roadblock to show their papers, Erwin smoking a cigarette with the men standing guard while Levi stays in the car to keep himself from hearing too much of that rough tone that Erwin has once again assumed. They’re let through without a problem, driving along through the countryside that seems a lot more tedious to Levi the second time around, stopping only once before they reach the cottage to stretch their legs and fill up the tank of the car; Levi sees Erwin using a handful of ration stamps on the petrol that to Levi, who’s never had luck with money, seems to cost a fortune.

They’re barely two kilometres from the guest house when the whole situation begins to dawn on Levi, how far he is from home and how close they are now to their destination. The further the distance to the cottage shortens, the more Levi starts to imagine what will happen once they get there: settling in, cooking a little something to eat and... then what? Suddenly the image of sitting with Erwin in front of a fireplace and talking seems burdened with badly-hidden objectives, with hopes and desires they both know of even if thus far they have all remained unspoken and untouched. Levi feels that pang of nerves again and the silence within the car seems to grow heavier as he realises nearly an hour has passed without him having said a word to Erwin – the thought of his lack of finding things to say lasting the entire weekend grips Levi and he wishes he could call the whole thing off.

“I must admit, I have been looking forward to this weekend myself,” Erwin says suddenly, a delayed response to a question Levi never thought to ask. “It feels good to get away – especially now.”

He means the thing with Lilian, Levi has no doubt, and he understands it. “You deserve it,” Levi tells the man, answering his glance though he feels the urge to keep staring out of the window.

“It means a lot,” Erwin responds, “hearing you say that.”

Levi shrugs in an attempt to dismiss the compliment. “You deserve a lot more than this,” he mutters, keeping his eyes on the tips of his shoes even when he catches Erwin glancing at him again.

“I don’t know,” Erwin replies, steering the car onto the small dirt road. “I can’t think of many things that are better than this.”

Levi agrees, though he doesn’t say anything, leaning closer to the window to catch a glimpse of the moss-covered roof through the foliage. The spotless, vibrant green of the summer has begun to pass, taken over slowly by the still subtle shades of yellow, brown and orange in its midst. Through the fading colours Levi can see the cottage more clearly now than last time, and the sight of it seems to make his innards twist with tension as they cross the short distance to it and Erwin stops the car by the little wooden gate.

“Here we are then,” the man says, sighing contentedly as he steps out, Levi following his example a touch hesitantly and pulling his bag out from the back seat.

He walks around the car as Erwin unlocks the trunk, lifting out a brown paper bag heavy with food before marching up to the door to struggle with the rusty old lock. Levi swings his bag more securely on his shoulder before grabbing some of the provisions and walking after Erwin into the cottage, placing the groceries onto the kitchen table and beginning to empty them into the cupboards to give his hands something to do and to clear away the clutter. Erwin appears by his side shortly after changing out of his uniform, weighing a paper package in his hands pensively for a few seconds before placing it gently into the cupboard beside a tin of tea.

“What’s in it?” Levi asks him, climbing up the rest of the steps from the cellar.

“Sugar,” Erwin replies, looking down at the label on a bottle of liquor before twisting open the cork and taking a swig.

“That whole package was full of sugar?” Levi asks in disbelief, shaking his head as Erwin nods. “Why the fuck do you need that much of it?”

“I thought we could make jam of the apples while we’re here,” Erwin explains, making Levi’s frown grow deeper. “In the cellar it should keep well over the winter.”

“Why the fuck do you need so much jam?” Levi asks now, accepting the bottle as Erwin hands it over, grimacing at the burning sensation in his throat.

“You never know,” Erwin says. “Darlett and Mike have been bringing over supplies. Should things get difficult one of us might need to use this place to hide in for a while. I thought the jam might be a better solution to trying to smuggle in large amounts of food.”

“Do you even know how to make jam?” Levi inquires and Erwin laughs.

“I must admit, I was hoping Farlan could have been of assistance there,” he says, scratching the back of his head, “but I asked Marie about it and I think I have a fairly good picture of how it’s done.”

“That makes one of us,” Levi mutters, folding up the paper bags and placing them by the stove, realising the chill in the air only when he thinks about lighting a fire. “Feels like your jam might keep just as well up here.”

“You’re right, the place has had a chance to cool down a bit too much since the summer by the feel of things,” Erwin agrees.

“Should I start lighting a fire here?” Levi asks but Erwin shakes his head.

“Since we’re only staying the weekend there’s no point in using the masonry oven,” he says. “The stove will keep the kitchen warm enough. We’ll be better off heating the fireplace in the sitting room.”

“It’s a bit cold for sleeping in,” Levi muses, not thinking to consider his words until Erwin clears his throat.

“Yes, well,” the man starts, looking suddenly embarrassed. “I thought heating the tiled oven in the bedroom would be more efficient – the cellar will keep the kitchen cool for the weekend no matter what we do.”

“So you think we should share?”

Levi watches Erwin consider the question, wondering whether he’s just imagining the hint of red on the man’s cheeks.

“Of course I never meant to assume such,” Erwin finally gets out. “I’ll be fine on the sofa if you’re not comfortable with–”

“It’s fine,” Levi interrupts him, though the words make his breath fall short. “Nothing we’ve not done before. It only makes sense.”

“Well, I suppose when you put it like that,” the man agrees hastily, crossing the kitchen to the back door. “I’d better get started.”

Levi nods a curt response, busying himself with the stove to prepare them a modest dinner of fried eggs and sausage with toasted bread while Erwin gets the fires going, trying not to think ahead and picturing it nonetheless. It’s true they’ve shared a bed before but something about this feels different; perhaps it’s the remoteness of the cottage, that feeling Levi gets of being able to be himself here more than anywhere else that makes him add a significance to the weekend that he’s not sure would otherwise be there. As they eat their humble meals, Levi watches Erwin, his stance relaxed, his broad shoulders not drawn to that rigorous posture of a soldier and he wonders whether this is the last time he will ever see the man like this, so human and so free.

After dinner they settle in front of the fireplace with mugs full of hot tea to which Erwin adds a splash of liquor, sitting down on the sofa too, another thing Levi notes is different here; even now they’re closer than in the city. He stirs his tea, holding on to the edges of the hot enamel mug as the fire forces heat on his cheeks, looking at Erwin as he stares into the flames; his mug is balanced on his thigh just like that time they sat on the steps, quiet and

calm like this. Levi remembers taking in the man's features then, that terribly handsome face that still seems out-of-place so close to Levi's own. It makes him think about Lilian, and how much more fitting a couple she and Erwin made and he wonders how Erwin feels about it now, but doesn't know how to ask.

"I can't tell you how good it feels to get away," Erwin says, sighing heavily and closing his eyes for a moment. "Lately I've started feeling as if Dresden is growing smaller by the day."

"I know what you mean," Levi states quietly. "Seems my neighbours are starting to resent me for not being out there at the frontlines – well, me and Farlan both."

"That sounds rather concerning," Erwin comments but Levi merely shrugs.

"I'm keeping an eye on it," Levi assures the man. "Besides, it's not as if we have any other place to go."

"I've been thinking about your situation," Erwin tells him pensively, "and there may come a time when you will need to go more permanently into hiding."

"You mean just lock ourselves up in some room and never go out?" Levi asks, shaking his head immediately as Erwin nods. "Not a chance in hell."

"It may come to that, Levi," Erwin insists, sipping at his tea carefully. "The Reich is at a breaking point, and the pressure that will soon be put on you and Farlan will be—"

"I don't care," Levi argues. "I'd rather live on the street than get cooped up like that."

"Perhaps it'll be better for us to return to this subject at some other time," Erwin states, falling silent for a moment before continuing, "I was surprised you were willing to leave without Farlan and Isabel."

Levi sighs. "I'm trying not to worry," he admits, taking a sip of his tea. "He can take care of her now, he's doing much better than before. And like he said, it's not as if I would be of much use if something happened even if I was there with them."

Erwin hums in agreement. "I suppose that's true enough, as sad as it is," he says, resting his enamel mug on his knee. "Is it the air raids you're worried about?"

"That and everything else," Levi confesses and Erwin nods.

"How easy it would be if we could foresee which ones of our actions are mistakes," he muses, drinking his tea. "There are so many people I could have avoided hurting."

Levi knows he's talking about Lilian, but doesn't know whether he should ask anything further; it seems unkind to bring it to Erwin's attention any further just as he's gotten away from the city. When the silence drags on, Erwin's clean blue eyes fix onto Levi's and his full lips spread to a smile as Levi's thin brows draw wrinkles onto his forehead.

"Always so quick to frown," Erwin whispers. "I wish one of these days I could inspire you to have expressions that show less concern."

“I frown at everyone,” Levi tries but Erwin’s sigh tells him he’s not pleased with the answer.

“Forgive me,” he says, turning his eyes back onto his mug of tea. “I suppose it’s rather selfish of me to wish I were the exception.”

The words cause a dull ache in Levi’s chest. “It’s not...” he starts but his words trail off even with him trying desperately to think of a way to express what he feels. “You are, in most things. It’s just what I do.”

“Why is that?”

Levi shrugs, knowing he can tell Erwin, can trust him if he wants to, and remembering suddenly what Farlan said: *try not to push him away*. “I just never really had much to smile about,” he says, feeling the inadequacy of his words as a pang of frustration.

Erwin seems to understand what he means, nodding and looking worried. “I wish I could ease some of that pain,” he mutters.

“It’s not your job to—”

“I know it isn’t,” Erwin interrupts Levi, turning to look at him again. “I simply wish for your happiness.” He takes a moment to stare into the flames again as Levi falls silent. “I won’t deny the fact that I’ve come to care for you a great deal, Levi.”

“I know,” Levi replies – and he does, he’s known for a long time. “You don’t need to deny that. Not because of me.”

“I’m sorry if it makes you uncomfortable, but I—”

“It doesn’t,” Levi tries to assure the man in frustration, still wondering whether he should talk about it, to open up that wound that even now is only starting to heal. “None of it is because of you. I feel... With you I feel better, about everything. It’s just that...”

Levi falls quiet in search of the right words, in search of the part of him that he found after the night in the Gestapo cell, the one that told Erwin what happened to get it out of his head, to make it a thing that wasn’t just his to bear. But the part of him that is easier to discover is the part that resists bringing Krieger here for any purpose, even to dispel another part of him from Levi’s life. He glances back at the bedroom, hearing the faint murmur of the fire crackling in the tiled oven, and tries to know what he wants and knowing only how treasured, sacred, it could be with Erwin here, in this place that feels suddenly to be theirs.

“I had an arrangement,” Levi hears himself start, hands clutching the sides of the mug, the enamel already cooling against his skin. “Not long ago I still had an arrangement with a man named Krieger.”

“The man Darlett asked you about?” Erwin asks as if to confirm and Levi nods, grateful the man didn’t ask what kind of arrangement they had.

“I knew him in Berlin,” Levi goes on, taking a breath to steady himself, “and I ran into him again in Dresden a few years after I got here. He recognised me at once and I thought I could

use that to get us travel papers out of the Reich.”

“Best laid plans...” Erwin mutters, making Levi scoff bitterly.

“I mistook him to be as stupid as he looks,” he says, feeling Erwin’s eyes on him but not daring to glance up. “Didn’t even stop to think what the cost of that mistake might be.”

“I can only imagine,” the man whispers into the silence that falls. “I’m sorry.”

Levi shrugs. “He’s gone now,” he says, hearing the strain in his own voice from trying to sound indifferent. “He had a deal with Osterhaus. I guess it means something good came out of that after all.”

“I’ve heard of those types of arrangements,” Erwin responds, holding Levi’s gaze for a moment before he turns away, “and it pains me that you should at any point in your life have found yourself in one.”

Levi shrugs again, knowing how empty the gesture must look. “He thinks he loves me,” he whispers. “That’s the worst thing about it. He keeps sending me letters but I burn them as soon as I get my hands on them.”

“More than understandable,” Erwin says quietly, his words nearly drowned out by the crackling of the logs in the fire. “If there’s anything I can—”

Levi shakes his head sharply. “It’s in the past now, most of it anyway,” he says. “I’d rather not spend time thinking about it.”

“Of course.”

“I just... wanted you to know,” Levi continues. “I know I probably seem mistrustful and like I don’t like it when you say nice things and act like you do around me and I just wanted you to know it’s not because I don’t trust *you*. I mean, most of the time I don’t understand why you say any of the shit you do but I don’t mind hearing it, for what it’s worth.”

Levi is relieved to see Erwin’s lips drawing to another smile. “I can’t say I’m pleased to hear my compliments don’t make sense to you,” the man says, “but I’m glad to hear they don’t make you uneasy.”

“I guess I ought to be used to them by now,” Levi mutters in response, making Erwin laugh quietly.

“I can’t say I’m usually like this,” he muses, as if only now realising it himself. “There’s something about you that inspires me to a level of honesty I’m hardly used to.”

The words make Levi think of all the things he still doesn’t know about Erwin, all the mysteries of his past, of Marie and his parents, how he can be both Holtz and... whoever he is. Though it’s not lack of honesty that makes Erwin keep those things to himself – after all, Levi’s never asked him about any of it – the statement still feels somehow contradictory. The questions burn in his mind, yearning to be asked and though he knows he can, and wonders whether Erwin has been expecting them, Levi’s mouth won’t form the words.

“We’ll be heading out early tomorrow,” Erwin suddenly speaks out, breaking the silence. “We’d best try and get some sleep.”

“Right,” Levi agrees quietly, still not getting to his feet until Erwin has crossed the cottage and walked out the backdoor; as he places his enamel mug in the sink, Levi can barely make out the man’s shape as he steps into the privy.

He walks into the bathroom, mixing together hot water from the heater and cold from the well and cleaning himself with a washcloth, wondering whether he ought to be more thorough than he usually is. It’s been long since he’s needed to doubt what Erwin wants – that question is simple, and it’s not what Levi is troubled by. As he looks at his reflection in the old mirror, Levi wonders whether it’s so difficult for him to know what he wants because it always seemed like a luxury he wasn’t allowed.

“There’s some water ready for you,” Levi tells Erwin as he walks back into the kitchen with a bucket of warm dishwater. “I thought you’d like to get clean.”

“Thank you, Levi,” Erwin says, and though he’s heard Erwin speak his name countless of times, something about it makes his stomach clench as he marches over to the sink.

The dishes take Levi long enough for Erwin to be done, stepping out of the bathroom with his wet, slicked back hair dripping onto the wooden floor. They hover in the kitchen for a few minutes doing meaningless chores and avoiding each other’s eyes, something unspoken hanging in the air between them as they finally enter the bedroom. It feels pleasantly warm, the tiled oven giving out heat even with the fire having died out; Levi can still smell it in the traces of smoke that mingle with the scents of dust and old wood. He can feel his heart hammering against his ribs as he watches Erwin removing his wrist watch and laying it on the nightstand before taking a seat on the bed to pull off his boots.

“There are some blankets in the cupboard if you’d like one,” Erwin says. “I’ve found anything heavier than a sheet makes me uncomfortably warm when there’s no window to keep open.”

Levi nods without knowing what to say, walking over to the cupboard and pulling out a quilt, the same one they used the previous time; Levi can still smell the grass on it. He places it at the foot of the bed before sitting down to untie the laces of his work boots, hearing the soft clinking sound of Erwin unbuckling his belt. He glances back before lining up his shoes neatly by the bed, pulling off his socks and shirt and folding them onto a pile on the floor. As he stands up to remove his trousers he glances at Erwin again; the man is standing by the bed wearing nothing but his underwear, thumbs pushed under the waistband but hesitating, as if he’s unsure whether to remove it. For a moment Levi wonders whether he is pleased about it or not, that Erwin has left the decision to him, but takes off the rest of his clothes in a rush, barely watching where they land before crawling under the covers and pressing his head onto a lumpy pillow. He can feel Erwin lying down next to him, the man’s weight pulling him closer instantly.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin whispers, his voice sounding hoarse and breathless. “The mattress is quite soft.”

Levi doesn't answer – words are failing him again, his mouth feels dry and useless – but permits his body to move closer, soon feeling Erwin hot against the skin of his back. He can hear Erwin's breathing, heavy and purposeful whereas the hand that looks for a place on Levi is aimless and uncertain. He takes it quickly and pulls Erwin's arm around himself, shifting closer to that warmth, waiting anxiously for the few seconds it takes Erwin to relax.

"No wonder you sweat so much," Levi comments in a whisper, feeling rather than hearing Erwin's laughter in the way the man's body moves against his own.

"I can tell you don't have that problem," Erwin mutters.

Levi draws his knees closer to his chest as Erwin pulls up his, feeling the soft hair on the man's thighs against his bare arse and wondering why he chose this. Even now it would be so easy to turn this into something else, to reach out his hand and touch Erwin, to get those questions answered first: what makes Erwin feel good, what makes him groan and sigh, what makes him pull at the sheets in frustration. In the end perhaps it's about nothing more than that, about which answers Levi wants to hear first, about how much Erwin is still a stranger. It's something Levi's had enough of, moments with strangers; perhaps all he wants is for this to be something different. He can't remember having done this with any of the others, feeling at ease with someone so close, and he thinks it's a better place to start; a thing that's just his and Erwin's.

Levi wakes several hours later to Erwin softly nudging him on the shoulder; the world beyond the windows is as dark as it was when they came to bed, and the room has grown cool as the embers have turned to ash. Levi feels it only on his face, the rest of his body still surrounded by Erwin's warmth under the sheet. He can feel his eyes sting with tiredness, and the thought of throwing off the covers seems like a monumentally stupid idea.

"We should get going," Erwin urges him quietly, standing up from the bed and stretching his back before letting out a loud yawn.

"What time is it?" Levi asks, feeling the cold seeping into the bed with the other man gone.

"Just past four," Erwin replies, laughing as Levi groans into his pillow before sitting up.

"At least I won't feel bad about shooting those blasted things," Levi mutters as Erwin chuckles again.

They dress quickly before having a bit of breakfast, slices of bread and cheese with an apple each from the orchard, setting out immediately after through the woods. Levi keeps scratching his arm through the moth-eaten sleeve of his woolly sweater, his breath coming out in puffs of steam in the cool autumn air that keeps finding ways through the knit and onto Levi's skin, keeping him shivering until fighting his way through thickets while carrying the rifle starts warming his body. The gun feels even heavier now than it did the previous time Levi held it, leaning onto his shoulder as he keeps his eyes on his feet not to stumble over some half-hidden molehill, working hard to keep up with Erwin whose long legs seem to carry him over the obstacles with much less effort.

Soon they come to a creek, a small side stream of the Elbe that runs close to the edge of a clearing. Erwin signals for Levi to stop, pointing toward the clearing ahead before asking for the rifle, showing Levi how to slide and secure the scope in place, before detaching the magazine and loading it with ten rounds. After getting back the rifle, Levi glances through the scope at the meadow ahead, magnified to reveal individual strands of tall grass.

“We should keep walking around the clearing,” Erwin tells him quietly, “stopping every once in a while for a good half a minute.”

Levi nods and follows Erwin, trying to keep an eye on the bumpy ground as well as the meadow ahead, peering through the scope across the clearing whenever they stop, spotting little else than dew-laden grass and fallen, moss-covered branches. The world is soundless in the pre-dawn darkness. When Levi scratches his arm the noise it makes seems as loud as their rustling footsteps were before, distracting him for a few seconds just as a furry, long-eared head turns up in his view. Levi swears under his breath, loading the rifle and positioning it more securely against his shoulder before lining up the shot, watching the hare for a few seconds before taking a deep breath and gently squeezing the trigger.

The force of the recoil makes the stock of the rifle collide painfully with Levi’s shoulder as the gunshot pierces the silence, followed by more of Levi’s swearing as he looks through the scope at the meadow where the hare is now running wild, looking for a burrow to hide in. His first shot was a miss, he didn’t anticipate the strength of the weapon, but as he follows his target he knows to hold the rifle more tightly against his body, firing a shot that still misses the hare by a hand’s width as it bounces along and disappears into a thicket by the far edge of the clearing. Levi hisses another curse before lowering the rifle and rubbing at the sore spot on his shoulder.

“Let me take a look at that,” Erwin says, walking over and pulling down the woollen sweater before running his fingers across Levi’s skin, making him grimace at the hurt and muttering, “I should have been clearer about the recoil.”

“It’s fine,” Levi tells him, shrugging back into his shirt. “I’ll be more careful next time.”

“This is the spot,” Erwin instructs, placing his hand between Levi’s neck and shoulder. “This soft, fleshy spot right here. You lean the rifle against this and pull it to you as tightly as you can.”

Levi nods. “Suppose it was beginner’s luck after all,” he mumbles quietly enough for Erwin not to hear it.

They set out again through the woods, looking for clearings or fields near water and tracks, peering down to examine droppings to make sure they’re in a good area. Whenever they stop Levi lifts the rifle, scanning the surroundings through the scope and seeing no signs of movement, until Erwin nudges at his arm and points at a tuft of grass sticking out in the middle of a meadow. Next to it sits a hare, ears pricked up and alert as it looks toward them. Levi steadies the rifle in his hands and pulls it closer to his flesh, watching the animal for another few seconds before taking the shot; it pierces the hare’s chest from the left and leaves it lying on its side flailing its legs as if looking for solid ground to carry it to safety.

They continue around the area like this for the next few hours, Erwin picking up their catch which even by the time the sun has risen counts only four hares and though Erwin assures him it's a very good result for a first time hunter, Levi can't help but feel nervous about his skills with the rifle. He used the handgun as if acting on some instinct, never having time to stop and consider what he was doing, but the rifle is much more technical, requiring more time and thought. He realises it even further when they return to the cottage and Erwin starts building a target from some pieces of wood he nails together as Levi waits on the steps, watching as the man removes more and more clothing as the day grows warmer; when he finally walks off into the woods to measure out a distance of about a hundred metres and nailing the target to a tree, Erwin's wearing nothing but his undershirt with dark stains appearing on the fabric even then.

"This'll be much easier than shooting at a live target," Erwin tells him as he returns, "but it will improve your knowledge of the weapon itself."

Levi gets to his feet somewhat arduously and walks over to Erwin, stopping by his side and squinting at the target which the scope brings close enough for him to see the rings Erwin has drawn onto the wood with a piece of coal. The rifle feels anything but steady in his hands as he pulls it toward his shoulder, wincing as the side of the stock digs into his injury. Even through the scope the target looks small and distant.

"Try not to overthink it." Erwin's voice comes quietly into his ear as the man leans so close that Levi can smell his sweat. "Try to achieve what you did that night by the tracks."

Levi can feel the strain of the weight on his arms as he tries to concentrate, tries to think back to that moment. It seems easier here in the garden of the cottage, the haze of the memories brought into focus. The temperature was much like this, cool enough to make you grow cold if you sat still for too long, but the scent of the trees was different; less dying leaves and damp earth and traces of smoke in the distance. Levi remembers the way the gravel crunched under the soles of their shoes, Erwin's grunts as he pulled at the bolts on the tie plate, the metallic bang as the bullet hit the rails right next to him. It feels good to have Erwin behind himself, like he was when Levi took that shot, safe behind a wall of flesh and Levi's steady aim. He looks at the target again, feeling the warmth of Erwin's body against his back as he breathes deeply and fires once, and again, and again, calmly and with purpose until the magazine is empty.

"It felt better now," he tells Erwin quietly as he finally lowers the rifle. "Maybe I just needed to get used to it."

Erwin nods, beckoning for Levi to follow as he crosses the distance to the target which shows a score of holes within the smallest circle.

"Beginner's luck, eh?" he asks Levi as he measures the holes with his fingers and wonders how the weight of the rifle that felt like a burden just moments before can suddenly feel so grounding.

They take a break to cook and eat lunch, falling asleep at opposite ends of the sofa for a few hours before getting to picking the apples off the trees in the orchard. The baskets they found in the kitchen grow full within the first thirty minutes and they move on to sacks and pots,

even the bucket Levi used when scrubbing the floors the previous time, which he reluctantly donates to the cause. They work at it for several hours with Erwin helping Levi up to the sturdier branches to reach for the higher fruit and to throw them down for Erwin to catch. By the time they are finished Levi feels tired and filthy, and he doubts he's ever had so many of his muscles ache at the same time.

"I don't know about you," he tells Erwin as they sit down in the kitchen, surrounded by the scent of apples that Levi's nose doesn't seem to grow numb to, "but I need a bath before dinner."

"You must be joking," Erwin responds, spreading his arms to reveal the darker blotches on his shirt as Levi snorts a laugh. "Even I'd call that smell rather potent."

"I hope you brought some soap," Levi comments, stretching his arms above his head and yawning before struggling back to his feet and walking into the bathroom, grateful beyond words for his decision to start heating the water while Erwin made lunch. He fills the tub quickly and only halfway to make sure there's enough hot water for Erwin, poking his head out to the kitchen before pulling off his shirt. "Well are you coming then?"

Erwin follows him after a curious glance, bringing a chair and laying it down by the bathtub as Levi undresses, slipping into the water as Erwin unwraps a fresh bar of soap; the lavender smells better with the apples. He sits down to dip a washcloth into the tub and starts scrubbing at Levi's body, being rough where he knows Levi will want him to and even gentler than usual on his right shoulder.

"You'll have a bruise," he notes as he rinses away the soap, running his thumb against the area.

"I've had worse," Levi tells him, not thinking to go further into it but continuing nevertheless, "I used to get into fights as a kid."

"I can imagine," Erwin mutters, wetting Levi's hair before running his fingers through it, making Levi groan.

"It took me a long time to learn not to," he says, leaning onto the edge of the tub. "It gets you noticed."

"So it does," the man agrees, scrubbing at the undercut on the back of Levi's head. "And you're noticeable enough already."

Levi scoffs but doesn't correct the man. "I'm sure you've had worse too."

"There are advantages to cosy desk jobs," Erwin says, laughing, "but I have taken a beating or two in my life, yes."

"Bet you gave as good as you got," Levi tells him, his own clumsy form of a compliment that makes Erwin laugh more loudly.

“I’ll bet you gave better,” Erwin replies, standing up and pulling off his undershirt. “My turn.”

“Says who?” Levi asks, planting his feet firmly on the bottom of the tub, still savouring the heat of the water and the scent of the lavender.

“Technically I am your commanding officer,” Erwin tells him, a smirk playing on his lips, “so I suppose I do.”

Levi snorts loudly. “Commander my arse,” he teases, clutching the edges of the tub with his hands. “You want me out of this tub you’re going to have to lift me out.”

“Oh, I’m sure it won’t come to that,” Erwin muses, kicking out of his boots and trousers. “After all, I can always join you.”

“Don’t you dare,” Levi barks, shifting uneasily as Erwin steps out of his underwear and takes a step closer. “I am not about to bathe in your sweat.”

“I guess you had better get out of the tub then,” the man says and lifts his leg, laughing as Levi grabs it and starts pushing it away, splashing water over the sides of the tub. “I’d wager my leg is stronger than your arms, Levi.”

“The hell it is,” Levi counters, putting his weight behind his hands as Erwin starts leaning into them, fighting the losing battle for a moment before giving up, scrambling out of the tub just as Erwin gets in. “You’re not supposed to wash yourself in someone else’s shitty bathwater!”

“Oh, you think you’re dirtier than you really are,” Erwin tells him, leaning against the tub, his bent legs relaxing and falling open. “Just add some more water and no one will be able to tell the difference.”

“I will,” Levi mutters but does it nonetheless, pouring in both hot and cold water and making sure the last one lands on Erwin’s face before taking a seat on the chair and turning to scrub at the man’s back, the goose bumps rising on his skin the only thing that makes him aware of his nakedness which feels more natural now.

“I received a report from central this week,” Erwin tells Levi as he runs the cloth along the muscles on his right arm. “Remind me about it later, I’ll show you where the frontlines are now.”

“Are they close?” Levi asks, feeling relief as he sees Erwin’s nod.

“Getting closer,” he says. “France is almost free.”

“So will this all end soon?”

Erwin groans as Levi pushes the washcloth against a tight muscle on his back. “By my estimation Hitler won’t last another year.”

Levi doesn't speak; he knows had he heard it anywhere else, a year would seem like an eternity considering how they live, but here time feels different, life itself feels different, and the thought of what comes after the war makes Levi want to change the subject.

"What do you say to a very simple dinner, preferably one that requires a minimal amount of cooking?" Erwin asks him suddenly, yawning in the water. "The day seems to have been quite strenuous enough already."

"I'll get something ready," Levi promises quietly, handing Erwin the piece of a towel and leaving the room, shivering as he crosses the cottage to get dressed in clean clothes.

By the time Erwin has finished his bath, Levi has brewed them a pot of tea and sliced and buttered a whole loaf's worth of bread, serving it on a large plate with cheese, cold cuts and pickles. As Erwin gets to lighting a fire in the sitting room Levi chops up a few apples, piling them into enamel mugs with ground up biscuits and honey, a simple dessert which tastes better than Levi would have thought. As they settle on the sofa in front of the hearth Levi brews them more tea, the hot enamel burning against his fingers as he takes a seat next to Erwin.

"It's one of the things I miss most about home," the man tells Levi, blowing into his cup.

"The tea?" Levi asks to confirm and Erwin nods, chuckling quietly.

"It's such an everyday thing where I come from," Erwin says. "Besides, Holtz is hardly one to enjoy such a simple thing to this extent."

"You talk about Holtz like he's a separate person from you," Levi observes, changing his hold on the mug. "Does that make it easier?"

"It's hard to say," Erwin replies after a while. "It's just a habit I've gotten into over the years. Sometimes it feels better to think of him as a character I'm playing, as if this is all just a strange piece of theatre."

"How does it work?" Levi asks now, all the questions causing an upheaval in his mind again. "Sometimes with Holtz it's almost difficult to recognise you."

Erwin utters a laugh. "I suppose I should take that as a compliment," he says, "but I must admit I find it a touch disturbing. Though I have no doubt it's one of the things that's kept me alive for this long."

"Just seems to me like everything about you changes," Levi says, meeting Erwin's gaze as he turns to look at him. "With me it's mostly about remembering my pleases and thank yous and not swearing, and even that feels like a challenge sometimes."

"Do you really want to know?" Erwin asks him, answering Levi's nod with a sigh and laying his cup of tea on the floor before standing up. "Remember I've had ten years to perfect this performance – and to say my life has depended on it is no exaggeration."

“I know,” Levi assures Erwin, drawing his legs onto the sofa and watching the man intently and though Levi feels his eyes are glued to him he still seems to miss the small changes, noticing them only after they’ve happened.

“It starts with how I stand,” Erwin explains, drawing Levi’s attention to what’s different. “Holtz has a military background, so there are obvious similarities in the resulting postures. But the way Holtz stands is stiffer, his shoulders always a bit hunched, like he’s had to learn away from drawing his head between them.”

“Why?”

Erwin looks suddenly sheepish. “I can’t say for sure,” he admits, “but perhaps it’s my interpretation of his social class, or perhaps it’s just a physical manifestation of his personality.”

Levi nods, taking a sip of his tea. “What’s next?”

“After the stance comes the walk,” Erwin says, starting to pace back and forth in front of the sofa. “Much like a military march but faster, more impatient, like he resents walking and wishes he could already get to where he’s supposed to go. Similarly the expression often shows a hint of irritation, no matter the circumstance.”

“But not always,” Levi states, thinking about Lilian; there must have been moments with her when it wasn’t like this.

“Not always,” Erwin confirms, still keeping that unimpressed look on his face as he stops to stand in front of Levi. “The speech, however, is the most important thing.”

Levi looks up at the man, marvelling at the change: so far they’ve all been Erwin’s words but spoken by Holtz, creating a strange half-person that is now becoming whole.

“The voice is lower,” Erwin says, sounding suddenly bad-tempered and unkind, “and the tone is rougher as well. It simply wouldn’t do to say things such as ‘fuck that Jew-loving bastard’ or ‘don’t just stand there you fucking idiot’ like I would.”

A shudder runs down Levi’s spine as he hears the words and his breath hitches in his throat, escaping in a quiet hiss when Erwin sits down, all signs of Holtz suddenly disappearing as he picks up his enamel mug and takes a sip of tea, smiling at the taste.

“Of course Holtz too has changed over the years, just like I myself have,” Erwin explains. “I’ve seen the war do that to others – the ones who stay exactly the same number very few indeed. Some men turn nervous and others turn cold. I knew instantly Holtz would be the latter kind.”

“I was wondering about that, whether you must have acted differently before,” Levi says. “Marie seems like a decent person and I have trouble picturing her spending time with Holtz.”

“Yes,” Erwin admits, “I met her shortly after I came to Germany, and it only took me a few years to tell her the truth. By that time I was always more myself around her than I was Holtz in any case.”

“Must have been confusing,” Levi thinks aloud and Erwin agrees.

“It was,” he says, falling quiet for a moment like remembering some forgotten memory as he stares into his mug, speaking out suddenly, “Do you know, there was a time when I was a little boy when all I wanted to be was an actor.”

Levi feels like sneering but resists, thinking Erwin would find it insulting.

“One summer I saw a small theatre company doing a play by Shakespeare,” the man goes on, his eyes distant, like more of him is now in the memory than in the present, “and for the rest of my holidays it was all I could think about. I devoured every word he had ever written and even acted out some of the scenes to my parents. It was the first thing I remember having wanted with all my heart.”

As he leaves the memory behind something in Erwin’s expression seems to break; Levi can see it beyond the smile, that hint of regret and anger.

“It has certainly been the role of a lifetime,” Erwin whispers, his voice joyless and hollow. “I should have been more careful with what I wished for.”

“I had one of those,” Levi blurts out, not knowing how to comfort Erwin, thinking a change of subject could do the job as well as anything else. “One of those childhood wishes.”

“Oh?” Erwin asks him, and Levi is relieved to see the shift in his expression: he’s curious. “What was it?”

“When I was really young I wanted to be a baker,” Levi says, not sure where any of this is coming from; there’s very little he remembers from his childhood, and even less he remembers about the time before Kenny. “I was hungry a lot, and it just seemed to me like they always had food.”

“Very pragmatic,” Erwin comments, drinking his tea and smiling now. “What about when you were older?”

“Nothing special,” Levi admits, trying to think of his secret desires but finding nothing. “I figured I would take over my uncle’s shop and that seemed good enough to me.”

“I can see practicality has been a continuous influence on your career choices,” Erwin says, making Levi shrug.

“Being a housekeeper is far less complicated than being a spy, you know,” he voices, smiling into his mug of tea as Erwin laughs.

“That’s very true,” he agrees. “I must admit at first I was on my way toward something far less complicated myself.”

“What’s that then?”

“I was finishing my university degree when I was recruited, studying history which my father was always very passionate about,” Erwin tells him. “I had considered a career in the military but my father was very opposed to the idea – the war had taught him to despise violence and conflict – and my eventual choice to abandon my studies was something he never learned to understand.”

“What about your mother?” Levi asks.

“She’s always had a way of seeing straight through me,” Erwin says, sounding affectionate. “She always knew when I was being serious about something, and recognised the things that meant a great deal to me.”

“You must miss them,” Levi says quietly, thinking about his own mother and wondering whether she knew him like that, inside out even when he was a little boy – Kenny certainly never did, or never cared to.

“Terribly,” Erwin admits, his features filling with grief. “My father passed away some years after I came to Germany. Of course at the time it was impossible for me to attend the funeral, and in fact I wasn’t informed of the occurrence until several weeks later.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Levi says quietly, not knowing what else would be appropriate, wondering if his mother had a funeral; knowing his uncle was the one who paid for it they had probably just wrapped her up in a sack and thrown her body in a ditch somewhere.

“It was a long time ago,” Erwin says, “and I’ve made my peace with it since.”

They both fall quiet, drinking the tea that’s already lukewarm and Levi thinks about all this new information, the questions that will now leave him be. Erwin seems more real to Levi as he looks at him now, like knowing about his past has made Levi see more of him through the things that made him who he is.

“You’ve never mentioned your father,” Erwin suddenly says, making Levi scoff.

“I don’t know who he is,” Levi tells the man. “My uncle said he got my mother into trouble, but when she followed him to Berlin he wanted nothing to do with her and then she couldn’t go back home either.”

“She must have been terribly frightened.”

Levi shrugs. “Probably,” he agrees. “I don’t remember much about her. By the time my uncle came looking for her she was already dead, in any case.”

“And he raised you?”

“If you can call it that,” Levi says, scoffing again. “I didn’t starve to death, and I guess he would’ve given me the shop if he could’ve, so that’s something.”

“I see,” Erwin whispers. “So he wasn’t what you’d call a parental sort of person?”

“Not at first,” Levi admits, “and by the time he was it was already too late.”

“Why was that?”

Levi frowns. “He used to drink a fair bit when I was younger,” he explains, his tone as emotionless as before, “but then Hitler came to power and it seems he lost his mind some. Kept getting more and more Jewish in the way he did things, studying the books, speaking Yiddish and trying to get me to do all of that stuff too.”

“But you didn’t,” Erwin states and Levi shakes his head.

“I didn’t understand any of it,” Levi says. “I guess by then I’d been too long without it. Just seemed ridiculous, to live your life according to some weird little scribbles on a piece of paper.”

Erwin laughs. “Well, when you put it like that I suppose it does sound a bit odd,” he agrees. “My father was never much of a one for religion either. He said it leads too easily to indoctrination.”

Levi nods along, though he doesn’t understand the word; in this moment it doesn’t seem important to ask Erwin to explain it. He empties his cup in a large gulp, grimacing at the cold liquid as he swallows it down. As the silence in the room drags on, Levi starts to feel the heat of the embers on his face and the third wide yawn he lets out makes him wonder what time it is.

“Perhaps we ought to go to bed,” Erwin suggests, looking at his watch. “It’s been a very long day.”

Levi nods in agreement before getting to his feet and taking the mugs to the kitchen, glancing through the open door to the bedroom and wondering what has happened to all the nervousness he felt before. As he follows Erwin through into the room, watching him as he undresses, Levi feels entirely at ease even when he sees Erwin growing aware of Levi’s eyes on him. When he pulls off his own clothes, Levi can tell that Erwin is observing him too, a sensation that makes Levi grow excited despite how oddly familiar it feels. As soon as he’s under the covers Levi shuffles closer to Erwin, breathing in the scent of him, savouring that quiet moment before the change from what they’ve been so far to that unknown thing of which Levi is no longer afraid.

It starts more softly than he thought it would, with his hand coming to rest on Erwin’s chest, the soft hairs smooth against his skin as he flexes his fingers. There’s such strength in Erwin’s body, Levi can feel it even with the man lying down like this, relaxed and unresisting under his touch. He gets up to lean on his elbow, meeting Erwin’s gaze; there’s curiosity in his expression, a quiet desire without a hint of pressure, telling Levi these are more his decisions than they are Erwin’s. When the man lifts his hand to run his fingers through Levi’s hair, he leans into the touch, making it stronger and more tangible than Erwin intended it, and Levi can’t tell if it’s because he wishes they were closer or to distract himself from the sudden arousal he’s already beginning to feel.

“Levi,” Erwin whispers, his voice strained and low, “you know I’d never want you to feel like—”

Levi shakes his head and Erwin falls silent, meeting the seriousness of Levi’s expression with a frown before Levi presses his face gently against the man’s chest, lips brushing clumsily against his skin. Levi draws one of his legs under himself to reach Erwin’s collarbone, kissing his way down the middle of his chest before getting on his knees and moving ungracefully to sit on Erwin’s legs, taking a moment to fight with the sheet that seems to reveal too much of his current state though he does his best to hide it within the folds of the fabric. Looking down at Erwin Levi can see his growing arousal through the covers, estimating its measure through the hazy outlines it creates under the cloth, knowing he’s never seen such symmetry and balance on anyone’s body before.

Levi meets Erwin’s gaze for a moment, taking in the redness of the man’s cheeks and the brightness of his eyes before bending down to leave a new trail of kisses down toward his abdomen; blunt little pecks, his lips and mouth are hideously dry, evidence of the nerves he didn’t feel before. He runs his hands up Erwin’s thighs, following the changes the movement causes, the eager growth of Erwin’s cock under the sheet. He can feel his own twitching in response somewhere within the gathered up mass of fabric and the sensation makes his armpits itch. It’s been so long since he’s done this, and back then it was never quite like it is now; time was a luxury they rarely had, the encounters were short-lived and too much for a single purpose. This is something different, like everything is with Erwin, always carrying more meaning than things have in the past.

Levi keeps his touches light, never straying under the sheet as his hands map out Erwin’s body, his thumbs trailing up his shaft and making him shudder as the white cotton grows darker around the tip. Levi brings his mouth down to it, tasting the salt through the fabric, smelling Erwin’s sweat and hearing his heavy sighs. Levi can feel his own arousal growing toward a discomfort but now everything is about Erwin, the tensing of his muscles, that first groan Levi’s tongue tempts out before he pulls back, surveying what the wetness of the covers has now made visible. He wraps his fingers around it, hiding the fleshy red, tracing the slit with the tip of his thumb and forcing Erwin to push up with his hips impatiently; when he moves his hands on Erwin’s abdomen, his thumb leaves a wet smear on the man’s skin.

Levi soon finds the softer he keeps his touches the more eager Erwin becomes, his breathing growing heavy and his movements more restless, breaking into shivers when Levi finally grabs the sheet and pulls it aside. His own stubby cock stands firm against his lower belly and the sight of its fully exposed tip makes Levi frown and wish to cover himself again, but glancing at Erwin’s face he decides not to. The man is looking at him, cheeks blushed and a sheen of sweat on his brow with an expression equal parts want and wonder and it occurs to Levi Erwin has never seen someone like him before. He can feel his own face growing warm as Erwin continues staring, never raising a hand to touch, just taking in Levi’s body from a distance and somehow it feels more intimate than anything Levi’s had done to him before.

He lowers his body between Erwin’s legs, kissing the insides of his thighs, savouring the tremor of his muscles against his lips as he moves up, surrounded quickly by the scents of sweat and lavender as he makes for those spots that are harder to reach. He can hear Erwin

swearing in a whisper as his fingers brush against those tender spots, his tongue finding a path up Erwin's length before he lets the man slide into his mouth; this is how Levi prefers it, with the man pinned under him, leaving him in control of what to do and when. He knows it shouldn't surprise him now to find Erwin so responsive to the directions Levi gives him, the little wordless signals Levi's hands give out. It seems like more than just consideration, like something deeper in Erwin's character, that military instinct of knowing when to command and knowing when to follow. When Erwin's hasty whispers start coming out in a language Levi doesn't understand, he tightens his hold around the man, ignoring the thoughtful tap on his shoulder and letting Erwin finish inside his mouth shuddering and groaning and calling Levi's name.

Though he feels the urge to leave the room, Levi doesn't rush it, giving Erwin's cock a few leisurely strokes before climbing out of bed and walking through the cottage to empty his mouth into the bathtub. He rinses out the mess with warm water from the heater, growing aware of his own erection again as he spits out some of the taste of Erwin that lingers in his mouth; it makes him uneasy, the thought of joining Erwin in bed, the thought of Erwin's hands on him, rendering him powerless and unresisting, of Erwin seeing all those ugly things Levi can't hide about himself. Erwin would be gentle, Levi knows as he leans against the wall and runs the palm of his hand along his own length, so considerate and no doubt much more skilled when it comes to these things than Levi himself is. He closes his eyes and pictures it, Erwin guiding him, kissing him, taking time and care to find the spots where Levi feels most pleasure, where Levi is now moving his own fingers, finishing just as he hears Erwin entering the kitchen, knowing Erwin has heard him too.

Levi leans on the wall for another few long moments, legs trembling under his weight as his breathing grows deeper and steadier; beyond the door Erwin returns from the privy and pours himself a glass of water, hesitating for a moment before leaving the room. Levi follows him after washing his hands, climbing into bed but keeping his distance, not knowing how to navigate the situation.

"May I?" Erwin finally whispers, his hand brushing against Levi's back.

He doesn't answer but turns to face the man, frowning at his concerned expression for a moment before burying his face against Erwin's side, breathing in that scent of sweat and lavender. For a few seconds Erwin stays still, perhaps surprised by the sudden closeness, finally wrapping his right arm around Levi's shoulders, chuckling sleepily when Levi shuffles even closer and falls asleep.

The following morning Levi wakes up to the sound of rain drumming against the windows and the roof, the moss muffling the noise and giving it a low resonance that fills the room. He stretches out his body in the bed, feeling Erwin warm and solid against him as he turns toward the man, taking in the lazy smile and the flash of blue barely visible between his eyelids.

"Good morning," Erwin wishes and yawns, his voice lower than usual. "Did you sleep well?"

Levi replies in a grunt, rubbing at his eyes and rolling onto his stomach, pulling Erwin's arm under his chin and leaning on it before asking, "What time is it?"

Erwin groans as he reaches out his other hand to pick up his watch, peering down at it and replying, "Almost seven."

Levi feels relieved; they still have so many hours to spend here, more of these calm moments filled with the sound of the rain and the musky scent of the bed they've shared, of remembering the previous night. He looks up at Erwin's face, meeting the man's gaze without hesitation even when Erwin strokes Levi's cheek with his fingers, tracing the outlines of Levi's jaw with his thumb to guide him closer. Levi lets him, allows him closer than he's ever permitted anyone before, meeting Erwin's lips in a quick kiss, and another, longer and more satisfying. It's a kind of softness Levi's never felt before, an intimacy he hasn't known to imagine. As they lie side by side on the bed Levi takes in the hints of wrinkles that appear in the corners of Erwin's eyes when he smiles, the curve of his nose, the strands of blond hair falling over his thick brows, and somehow he knows his life is now utterly changed.

"Levi," Erwin whispers, smiling more widely but not continuing, as if that was all he wanted to say.

"Ackerman," Levi finishes without thinking about it further until it's out of his mouth. The name sounds strange in his own ears; it's been so long since he's heard it.

"What?" Erwin asks, his brows pulling to a frown as Levi sighs.

"It's my name," he tells the man. "Levi Ackerman."

"Ackerman," Erwin repeats and laughs, offering Levi his hand. "Well, it's wonderful to finally meet you, Herr Ackerman. My name is Erwin Smith, and may I say it is truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Levi frowns at the man's hand and scoffs, shaking it nonetheless. "Right," he mutters, turning the name around in his mind; it sounds all wrong when he says it out loud. "Herr Smith."

Erwin laughs. "It may seem strange," he starts, "but I had managed to forget I didn't know your full name."

Levi shrugs. "There was always a lot we didn't know about each other," he says, "but I like this better."

"I agree," Erwin tells him and stretches out his legs, sliding the other between Levi's. "I must admit I have been very curious about you for a very long time."

"You never asked much anything," Levi points out, knowing it's what he has done himself for months.

"I didn't want to pry," Erwin explains. "You seem like a very private person."

"Just because I have to be," Levi responds. "I don't mind telling you."

“Do you know,” Erwin starts, stopping and closing his eyes for a moment, looking embarrassed. “When I first saw you I thought you were in your late teens.”

Levi clicks his tongue and Erwin laughs. “Found out you were wrong quickly enough,” he mutters, making the man nod.

“Well, you are a fair bit younger than me in any case, so perhaps my mistake is understandable.”

“There’s a big difference between eighteen and twenty-four,” Levi tells him in a huff. “And how old are you anyway? In your forties?”

Erwin laughs even more loudly than before. “I am thirty-four actually,” he corrects Levi playfully. “As of yesterday in fact.”

“It was your birthday yesterday?” Levi asks him, clicking his tongue and punching Erwin in the arm after he nods. “You should have said something.”

“At my age birthdays hardly seem to matter,” Erwin explains. “I didn’t realise you’d like to know.”

Levi sighs, sitting up in the bed. “Well, I guess I’d better go make us some breakfast or something,” he mutters, shooting Erwin a warning glance before he starts to protest. “And this one time I’ll even bring it to you in bed.”

“And I wish you to know how utterly humbled I am by the gesture,” Erwin tells him, making Levi roll his eyes as he pulls on a pair of trousers, a shirt and his shoes before leaving the room.

After a quick visit to the privy Levi starts on the breakfast, putting as much effort into it as he can, frying up sausages and eggs, toasting slices of bread and letting small pieces of butter melt on top of them, brewing tea and cutting up cheese, assembling them all onto a tray which he carries out of the kitchen, catching a glimpse of Erwin just as he skulks back into the bedroom.

“I thought I told you to stay in bed,” Levi tells Erwin as the man climbs hurriedly back between the sheets holding a book in his hand.

“I’m sorry,” he says as Levi lays the tray on the bed and kicks off his shoes. “I remembered I promised to show you the current positions of the frontlines.”

Levi sits down close to Erwin as the man opens the book, showing a map of Europe the like of which Levi recalls hazily from his school days. He peers down at it and hands Erwin his plate of breakfast before positioning his own in his lap, skewering a small sausage and taking a bite out of it as Erwin starts drawing on the page with his finger.

“This is the border between Germany and France,” he explains, calmly and patiently, following a thicker line on the map before moving a fraction to the left. “And this is as far as the Allied forces have advanced since the invasion of Normandy.”

“Where’s Dresden?” Levi asks, making Erwin glance up in surprise.

“Oh, I’m sorry, of course,” he says hurriedly, pointing at a small dot far to the east from the line he just pointed out. “Dresden is here, and the Red Army troops are currently positioned just about here.”

Levi looks at the area Erwin is pointing out, wondering how the short distance on the map measures in real life. It doesn’t seem very far like this but the reality of it must be something different, and in war even a few kilometres must take a long time to cross. Still it gives him hope, making Erwin’s estimation for how long the bloodshed will last seem like more than just words.

“There it is,” Erwin whispers, closing the book and laying it on the nightstand. “It seems very distant from here, of course.”

Levi grunts in agreement and they eat their breakfast, their bellies growing uncomfortably full from the amount of it, the only time Levi remembers ever having had so much to eat. Erwin thanks him one too many times for it, making Levi click his tongue impatiently as he starts on the dishes while Erwin works in the garden, only coming inside after Levi has finished cleaning the cottage, dripping wet with mud all over his boots.

“Bathroom,” Levi tells him, inspecting the shoes after Erwin has cleaned them, scrubbing at them with a rag for a moment longer while Erwin laughs.

“The army was much more lenient than you are,” he complains as Levi hands him back his boots, scoffing but taking it as a compliment.

They start making the jam; Levi peels, cores and chops the apples as Erwin handles the cooking, mixing them in big pots with sugar and pectin, boiling water to sanitize a collection of glass jars he carries up from the shelves in the cellar. Levi watches Erwin as he sweats at the stove, tasting the jam with the big spoon he uses for mixing, and it seems strange to see him like this, so at home doing such a domestic task.

They fill the jars and Erwin carries them down again as Levi cleans the kitchen, scrubbing at the counters and sink to get rid of all the sticky stains, all the while growing more aware of the passing of time. As they both start packing up their things Levi wonders whether the incident by the river could have been a good thing after all; it feels worse to leave the cottage like this, when nothing has been ruined and the rain keeps beating against the windows and spending another evening with Erwin seems like the better choice by far. Levi can sense the man feels it too, but neither of them gives words to that longing to stay, perhaps thinking it would only make leaving that much harder.

They pack their things in the trunk of the car, including the hares that Erwin gutted and left in the woodshed to hang overnight, driving back and filling the hours with more silence than conversation. It doesn’t bother Levi; there will be more time for talking now that they’ve started, calm moments in Erwin’s apartment that they can use however they please. And still the ache in Levi’s chest keeps growing sharper as they draw closer to Dresden, twisting his insides by the time Erwin stops the car under Levi’s bedroom window.

“Here we are then,” he says again and though he smiles, the tone of his voice tells Levi he wishes they were only now leaving for the cottage. “I suppose I’ll see you the day after tomorrow.”

Levi nods wordlessly, holding Erwin’s gaze for a moment before stepping out of the car and grabbing his things, including two of the hares; he takes the other one to Frau Schultz on his way to the apartment, giving her his condolences along with the gift. She seems pleased enough by it, thanking him several times before he manages to continue on his way, greeted by Farlan and Isabel at the door.

“I told you we’d be alright,” Farlan says as Isabel rushes in for a hug, holding onto Levi tightly for a few seconds before clutching the hare, which Farlan in turn snatches from her hands.

“I never doubted it,” Levi replies, making the other man snort.

As they return to the kitchen to continue arguing amongst themselves Levi walks through the apartment and into the bedroom, pulling the dirty clothes out of his bag before taking a seat on the bed. The hum of the city seems strange again after the silence of the cottage, and everything in his home seems suddenly foreign, as if Levi had never lived in it for a day. He looks out of the rain-streaked window at the building across the street, thinking about the drumming of the drops against the moss-covered roof, and it takes him a moment to realise he’s not alone in the room.

“What did you say?” Levi asks Farlan who frowns as he looks at him from the door.

“I wanted to know how long you had time to hang the hare for,” he replies, crossing his arms over his chest and squinting at the distant look on Levi’s face before asking, “Are you alright?”

Levi presses the palms of his hand against his closed eyelids. “I’m fine.”

Something about Farlan’s expression shifts, making room for more concern. “Oh,” he voices, as if suddenly understanding something. “So you feel it now.”

Levi takes a deep breath and doesn’t say a word.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- sexual content
- hunting animals :(

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Literal blood, sweat and tears have gone into this chapter so I hope you all enjoy it. I'm going to go and see if I can catch a few hours' rest from this terrible cough that's been plaguing me for days now. The next deadline falls on 1st April.

Also go follow these people on tumblr: [adnerdiora](#), [mikoto](#), [seitsensarvi](#), [und-der-wald](#) all of whom have made amazing art inspired by Dresden. I am beyond humbled someone would share their inspiration with me!

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!
I'm also on [twitter](#)!

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The events of the weekend keep holding Levi's thoughts even the following day, making him distracted and unresponsive when he sits down for breakfast with Farlan and Isabel. The day is as grey and gloomy as the one before, light rain keeps drumming against the windows and the roof, and the only room that feels properly warm is the kitchen where they spend hour after hour while Farlan works, the ruler of his domain. By midday he's baking bread, a heavy loaf with chestnut flour mixed in with the regular ones – a tip he learned from Frau Gernhardt, he explains to Levi who nods along, losing another game of Klüberjass to Isabel as he fails again to keep his mind in the present. Something of the cottage seems to linger in the smoke-scented air and the way Levi's cheeks feel hot and flushed, like they did when they were sitting in front of the fireplace, he and Erwin, lulled to sleep by the flames and the exertion of the hunt.

"Would you look at what two days away from us have done to him, Isabel," Farlan teases as he closes the oven door and lifts the dead hare on the table. "You'd think he's gone daft, having been deprived of our lovely company for so long."

"What does deprived mean?" Isabel asks him back and Farlan sighs, using a kitchen towel to dry the wet handle of the knife he's holding.

"Oh, never mind," he huffs out, cutting deep gashes around the hare's hind feet before slicing upward along the insides of the legs. Farlan points the knife at the sizable hole the bullet has left behind a couple of centimetres from the hare's muddy eye. "I guess the hunting was a success, in any case. Erwin has a good aim."

Levi nods absently before yawning. “Well, we didn’t come back empty handed,” he allows, following Farlan’s hands with his eyes as he ties up the hare’s legs with a piece of coarse string.

“And the rest of it? It hardly took you all weekend to shoot a hare or two,” Farlan inquires, casting Levi a curious glance as he rummages through their basket of kindling. He pulls out a few pages of an old newspaper, ignoring Levi’s warning glare as he goes on, “Seems to me like you two really... enjoyed yourselves.”

“We made jam,” Levi tells the man. “Lots of apples in the orchard.”

“That’s not *exactly* what I—”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Levi interrupts Farlan as Isabel sighs and rolls her eyes, at both of them it seems. “I’m just trying to avoid telling you to mind your own business.”

Farlan sighs even more loudly than before as he lays the pieces of paper down on the floor near the corner of the room. “Oh no, please, don’t mind me,” he says wearily as he hangs the hare up on a hook by its hind legs and starts pulling on the skin to remove it. “I’ll just be here, cooking your food, cleaning up after you, combing the lice out of your hair. But honestly, after everything I do for you there really is no need for you to include me in your life so please, don’t tell me anything. I really do prefer it that way. It really helps to keep all of this so much more professional.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “There’s nothing to tell,” he insists. “And I don’t understand why you care, in any case.”

Farlan scoffs as he gives the bundle of fur in his hands one last tug before returning to the table to chop off the hare’s head. “Isn’t it obvious?” he asks Levi now, something poorly hidden breaking through his indignation. “I’m living vicariously through you, of course.”

“I doubt I could tell you anything you haven’t done yourself,” Levi argues, making Farlan chuckle.

“I doubt that too, but humour me, I’ve not had or even heard of a good fu—”

“You both should humour me and shut your nasty mouths,” Isabel mutters, shuffling the cards. “That stuff is foul and I don’t want to hear anything about it. I’d rather you taught me how you skinned that rabbit so quickly.”

“Fine, we’ll keep all that nasty stuff far from your delicate ears,” Farlan gives up, taking Isabel through skinning the rabbit while Levi brews them all a pot of tea, happy that the man doesn’t return to the subject again.

That night in bed Levi shuffles close to Farlan under the sheets, wrapping his arm loosely around the other man; the gesture takes Farlan by surprise, Levi can tell from the moment of tension before his muscles relax under Levi’s touch. He breathes in that soapy scent that is so different from Erwin’s lavender, and it feels strange to realise how much he’s missed it. It

feels like months since they've been close like this and as Levi thinks back to what caused them to stop, he recognises absently how close to the truth his estimation is.

"What's brought this on then?" Farlan mumbles sleepily but doesn't seem to mind the sudden closeness.

Levi shrugs against the mattress. "Do I need a reason to do this?" he asks, listening to Farlan's quiet chuckling.

"No, you don't," the other man says, "and I can't say I mind it either. I mean, you have Erwin, you know."

Levi agrees in a grunt, wishing distantly he could talk about how it actually is, how pulling Erwin's arm around himself made Levi feel shielded and strong, how he wishes being close to Erwin could be as easy and comfortable as this. He can't find the words for any of it, however, and he doubts whether Farlan could understand with there being so much he doesn't know about Levi's life.

"I know you don't want to talk about it, and I won't force you to," Farlan mutters as Levi pulls him closer, "but I have to remind you to be careful."

"With what?"

"Just... try to remember what this is, with you and Erwin," Farlan tells him quietly, "and what it can't be. Try to bear in mind that it won't last and you'll save yourself a lot of heartache later on."

Levi falls silent, considering Farlan's words for a moment before the man continues.

"I'm not trying to be cruel, you know," he says softly. "It won't help you to forget what the world is like. Sooner or later it's going to catch up with you."

"I know," Levi replies; and he does, though during those days at the cottage he almost managed to forget.

"I hope you can enjoy it regardless," Farlan goes on, smiling. "It's wonderful seeing you like this."

Levi barely grunts another response before drifting off to a restless sleep from which he wakes up the next morning feeling tired and disorientated. The day seems to pass very slowly even with the several hours it takes him and Farlan to do the shopping, but it isn't until he starts nearing Erwin's apartment on his way through the city that Levi grasps the cause for his impatience. Thinking back to what Farlan said it seems like a bad sign to be so anxious to see the man again but as he half runs up the steps to Erwin's apartment, Levi wonders whether he could help it even if he tried. Something feels to have permanently shifted with that decision he made at the cottage even if Levi never thought spending a night with Erwin would make that much of a difference. It seems Levi's last memory of the man is from Sunday morning; the memory of the softness of his lips is so vivid that for a moment Levi stops to bite his own. As he knocks on the door, Levi's hand feels heavy and clumsy, filling him with

memories of how Erwin's skin felt against it and with dread as he wonders if it was as ungraceful that night as it feels right now.

When Erwin finally answers the door Levi finds his thoughts trapped even further by that night, the way the man felt underneath him, how his muscles tensed and relaxed, how he filled Levi's mouth and kissed him the morning after. Levi remembers the strange name the man revealed – he's been savouring it in the back of his mind since Sunday – and he fits it silently on his tongue again as he watches Erwin, almost as if to see if it makes the man look different. The usual delighted smile is in place, the thick brows raised slightly over the bright blue eyes as Erwin looks at Levi for a few seconds before speaking.

"Hello," he says softly, his low voice still echoing quietly in the stairwell.

"Yes. Hello," Levi responds, feeling stupid when he hears Erwin clearing his throat. "It's Tuesday so... Here I am."

"So it would seem," the man tells him before stepping aside. "Please, come in."

Levi nods wordlessly and crosses the threshold; there is something different about the way Erwin seems to tower over him now, some spark it lights in Levi that before was just an itch that found no release. He thinks about taking a step closer to breach some of that distance that still falls between them but as soon as the thought has crossed his mind he catches a hint of movement from the corner of his eye. He turns his head to see Marie walking toward them, clearly with some effort, her enormous rounded belly leading the way.

"Oh, hello again," she voices kindly but tiredly, her breath falling short even from crossing the short distance from the sitting room to the entrance. "I would love to greet you properly, but I'm afraid I must visit the bathroom – again. Honestly, this is getting just ridiculous."

"At least you don't have long to go now," Erwin remarks, but the statement doesn't seem to please the woman, who scoffs.

"Thank you, dear, but I have to say it's quite a small comfort right at this minute. This one is certainly taking its time," she huffs, rubbing her back as she passes them. "I'll call out for you if I can't get up from the toilet – horrifying how real that concern is these days."

Erwin laughs as Marie disappears into the bathroom, turning around to lead Levi into the kitchen. "I'm afraid we've already started on tea," he says, "but I could make some more if you'd like a cup."

"Thank you," Levi answers, wondering why that odd formality has crept into his speech; it's as if he's talking to one of his neighbours. "I'd like that."

They walk into the kitchen together and Erwin invites Levi to take a seat before getting to the task of boiling more water for Levi's tea. An odd silence grows in the space between them as the man joins Levi at the table and though Levi tries to think of something with which to break it, he comes up with nothing.

“How have you been?” Erwin asks Levi to his relief. “Are you adjusting well to life back in the city?”

Levi frowns. “It’s just how I left it,” he remarks dryly and Erwin laughs. “What’s there to adjust to?”

“I find it often takes me a few days,” Erwin tells him, “but I’m sure you’re better at that sort of thing.”

Levi grunts and they fall quiet again for an awkward few seconds before Erwin speaks next.

“And how are Farlan and Isabel?”

“They’re fine,” Levi says truthfully, wondering whether Erwin has often asked him that before and realising it’s hardly a habit of his.

“Good,” he utters briskly; Levi can hear Marie leaving the bathroom. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Levi finishes brewing the tea as Erwin walks back out into the sitting room, following him and flashing a strained smile at Marie before taking a seat on the sofa. The odd silence lingers between them all and suddenly it feels wrong to Levi that it should be like this now between him and Erwin, so formal and uncomfortable. Levi can’t help but wonder if it’s something that happens often after a change like that, having nothing to compare this to.

“Erwin never told me how the two of you met,” Marie suddenly says, making Levi glance at Erwin who doesn’t seem to find the question nearly as strange as Levi does.

“He helped me out of a tight spot once,” Levi replies evasively.

“Hopefully it wasn’t anything too serious,” Marie comments, looking genuinely concerned, but Levi shakes his head.

“Just a little run-in with the police,” he tells her, stirring his tea. “It ended well enough.”

“Levi’s assistance has been invaluable to me,” Erwin puts in and Marie smiles more widely. “He has a wide variety of skills, many of which complement my own.”

“You seem like a good match,” Marie observes. “It’s strange, but it seems as though I can tell how well-suited you two are even after catching such a small glimpse of you together.”

Levi can feel his face growing warm and suddenly he remembers that moment by the river with Farlan, how they lay in the shade of the beech tree and talked about Erwin and Christofer, and how in this world people like them don’t have that: shared homes, shared lives, families of their own. He listens absently as Erwin and Marie fall back into some earlier conversation, making an odd grunt of a reply here and there until he has finished his tea and manages to convince them both to stop objecting to him starting on scrubbing the floors. It seems strange to Levi how disappointed Erwin appears to be with this and he feels the man casting glances in his direction even when he escorts Marie to the door as she takes her leave.

“I’m afraid this’ll be my last visit in a while,” Levi can hear her saying while he rubs at a patch of floor in the corner under the small cupboard. “This little one will want to see the world soon, and after that I’ll have my hands full.”

“Send me a message when it happens, if you can,” Erwin responds, and Levi thinks he’s never heard such fondness in his tone before, “and I’d like to visit at your earliest convenience, if it’s alright.”

“You’re very sweet,” Marie tells him kindly. “Of course I’ll let you know, as soon as I’ll be able to. Nile may also get a few days to visit – it is his first born, after all.”

“I hope he will.” Levi can hear the slight strain in Erwin’s voice, though he doesn’t understand the cause of it; it makes him suddenly curious. “You both deserve such happiness.”

“He writes about you more and more these days,” Marie says, suddenly sad. “Please, wouldn’t you take the first–”

“I’m sorry, Marie,” Erwin interrupts her, “but I still see no way to rectify what happened back then.”

“The war has changed how he sees things, Erwin,” she insists. “If you could just give him–”

“I’m sorry,” Erwin repeats, his voice bordering on the impatient tone of Holtz and it makes Levi shudder, “but I cannot. Please, don’t ask me again.”

“As you wish,” Marie says and sighs, “but should he write to you, I really wish you’d answer. With the way things are you may not have long to make things right. I trust it’s what you want, is it not?”

“Of course,” Erwin admits so quietly Levi needs to strain to hear, “but you must understand how difficult it still seems.”

“Difficult,” she repeats his words, “but not impossible. Just remember that, and try to remember how things were before.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promises before telling her goodbye.

He returns to the sitting room where Levi has busied himself with the floors again, scrubbing at the wooden planks as Erwin takes a seat in his armchair and sighs wearily. The sound leaves behind that unnerving silence from before and Levi wonders whether it would be alright to ask Erwin what all that with Marie was about, but glancing at the man he holds his tongue instead. There’s a sudden tiredness on Erwin’s features, something Levi didn’t notice before or perhaps something that wasn’t present until this moment. His hands grow heavy with the urge to reach out and touch Erwin, to pull him close until his forehead is pressed against the beat of his heart, but the hour seems too early and the setting too familiar, and Levi fears it would feel too much like something real lovers do; couples on Sunday mornings, and they’re not that, could never be that, just like Farlan said.

“It feels strange,” Erwin starts, making Levi look behind himself at him, wondering whether Erwin’s thoughts are again in line with his own, but instead Erwin continues, “watching you clean.”

Levi scoffs. “You must have seen me clean up in here half a hundred times by now,” he points out, dipping the rag into the bucket of water before wringing it and getting to work again.

“It’s different now,” Erwin argues. “You shouldn’t be doing that for me. I should clean up after myself.”

Levi scoffs more loudly. “I thought we had talked about how rubbish you are at that,” he counters. “I’ve taken a lot of care with this place. Do you really think I’m going to let you ruin it with whatever you think passes for clean?”

“Still,” Erwin goes on. “We’re equals. You shouldn’t be working for me to begin with.”

“And why does me working for you make me any less your equal?” Levi asks the man now. “If it bothers you to think of it as you paying me, just think of it as you sharing from yours since you have so much to spare, and let me keep this place liveable so I won’t mind spending a few hours here every once in a while.”

Erwin sighs again. “Well, could you at least take a break?”

“I’ve barely even started.”

“Even so,” Erwin insists. “I’ll make us some more tea, and we can listen to some music, if you’d like.”

Levi stares at the faint boot prints on the floor for a few seconds before turning to Erwin, taking in the man’s troubled expression before nodding quickly. “You can make the tea while I finish with the floor here. And you could make me a couple of sandwiches too, if you’ve got them.”

“Of course,” Erwin says, sounding relieved as he gets up from his seat again, brushing his hands on his thighs. “Tea and sandwiches coming right up, Herr Ackerman.”

Levi casts a half-amused glance in his direction before scrubbing the rest of the floors, hearing the record player giving out the first few notes of an old love song as he pours the dirty water into the bathtub. When he walks back to the sitting room he finds Erwin on the sofa, the tea and sandwiches placed neatly on a tray on the coffee table; Erwin hands him his cup as soon he’s sat down beside him.

“I know you don’t mind the work,” Erwin starts, “and I am sorry to keep you from it, but I find I’ve been eager to see you since Sunday. All I really wanted was for us to have a moment together, like this.”

Levi reaches over to the table and grabs a sandwich, not knowing what to say, wishing the movement would make up for the silence. Biting into it gives him a further reason to keep

quiet as his mind struggles to think, to find something nice to give Erwin as a reply, but all he seems to hear are Farlan's words in his ear: *Don't forget what the world is like.*

"Levi?" Erwin asks, making him look up from the sofa. "Is everything alright?"

Levi hurries to nod. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem quiet – more so than usual, that is," Erwin explains, frowning. "I hope you didn't find what Marie said too intrusive. I don't think she was trying to imply–"

"No, that's not it," Levi interrupts the man, not fully understanding why the thought of hearing the end of that sentence makes him feel so uncomfortable, makes him feel like all of this might be real. "I like her. She's decent."

"Yes," Erwin agrees at once, "she's one of the most wonderful people I have ever met. I guess I hardly need to say it out loud that I am very fond of her."

"Not so fond of–" Levi starts before he can stop himself, turning back to his sandwich to avoid the inquiring look on Erwin's face.

"Not so fond of what?" the man asks, but Levi shakes his head.

"Nothing," he insists. "Just forget I ever said it."

It's what he's been thinking ever since that conversation he overheard; some bad blood between Erwin and Marie's husband, but why? Erwin would explain it to him of course if he asked about it, but something is forcing Levi to hold back. They shared things at the cottage, intimate things – and who knows if Erwin's ever told those things to anyone before? – but it all feels different here, in the real world, where Levi can no longer pretend they're the only two people left.

"Are you sure you're–"

"I told you, I'm fine," Levi interrupts again, getting to his feet. "I should go. It's getting late."

"Oh," Erwin voices, and the disappointment in that one sound nearly makes Levi cringe. "Well, if you're sure. You know I always welcome your company – however long you want to stay."

"I know," Levi tells him, thinking up excuses but giving none in the end; Erwin deserves better than that. "I'll do a better job on Thursday."

"You know I don't care about that, Levi," Erwin says, and when Levi glances up at his face he sees a mixture of confusion and patience. "You could come here for any reason under the sun and I would be happy to see you."

"I know," Levi repeats, wanting to say something more but failing, a surge of new frustration flooding his mind as he can't find the right kind of expression of gratitude.

In the middle of helping Levi pack up the food he's bought for him, Erwin passes Levi in the narrow space of the kitchen, clutching him by the shoulders as he makes his way to the pantry. For anyone else a touch like that would be insignificant enough, but something about those few seconds imprints itself onto Levi's mind – Erwin's smile as he looked at Levi, the gentle firmness of his hands, the quiet apology he made as he stepped out of Levi's way. Such an unnecessary touch; Levi struggles to understand what purpose it served, if not Erwin's pleasure at having a part of Levi's body pressed against the palms of his hands, if even for such a short time. It reminds Levi of how men touch women when they guide them through doorways or when they help them into their coats at the end of an evening out.

When he gets back home Levi barely avoids a run-in with Frau Niemeyer on his way to the communal bathroom to draw himself a bath, sitting in the lukewarm water and trying not to think about all the things Erwin deserves to hear but Levi can't bring himself to say. Here in the bleakness of the city it's easier for Levi to remember those days in Berlin, how fleeting everything that happened between him and other men was, how ridiculous it was to think that it could ever be anything more than that. It's a nagging thought that follows Levi to bed, how admitting you feel something is all fine and good as long as you don't mistake it to be anything like what normal people have.

He does his best to hide his confusion and unease from Farlan and Isabel, managing well enough until the evening when the howling of the sirens in the distance makes him swear out loud so offensively that even Farlan looks surprised to hear it. He mutters a quick apology as they rush down the stairs to the basement, taking their usual seats on the floor and beginning their waiting that proves again to be in vain as the bombs fail to fall. As Levi and Farlan are heading out with the rest of their neighbours Isabel runs to them ahead of Frau Gernhardt, asking if it would be alright if she went over for a little bit to listen to the radio. When she joins their company, Frau Gernhardt quickly extends the invitation, serving Levi and Farlan cups of bitter grain coffee in her homely sitting room while Isabel, Hanna and Bruno huddle around the wireless.

"Thank you again for the chestnut flour," Farlan tells their hostess. "It worked really well in the loaf, just like you said."

"You're very welcome," Frau Gernhardt replies, smiling warmly. "I think it's very good of you to take over that task – with no woman present, you understand."

"Oh, I don't mind it," Farlan assures her, sipping at his grain coffee. "And after all, someone has to do it. I suppose I was just the one of us for whom it was easiest to learn all of that. I grew up watching my mother cook and bake, and I guess it has always held a kind of fascination for me."

"I see," Frau Gernhardt says. "So it's lucky that you three crossed paths then."

"It really is," Levi joins the conversation. "My mother never had the chance to teach us any of that, and even though I know how to get by, my skills in the kitchen don't usually produce anything you'd call particularly enjoyable."

"But you're good with cleaning," Farlan points out, "so together we can take care of Isabel rather well I think."

“I’m very happy she has you,” Frau Gernhardt says. “There are so many children and young people now who have no one. Just thinking about Isabel facing that fate breaks my heart, it truly does.”

“Mama!” Hanna exclaims suddenly, running over to her mother. “The program’s ended. Can we go build a fort with Isabel in the bedroom?”

“Only if you clean it up before bedtime,” she tells her gently and off they run, Bruno hanging off Isabel’s back as she carries him out of the room. “You have no idea how much she helps me with them.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Levi hears Farlan say, but his focus is shifting to the news on the radio.

“Could you turn that up? Please?” he asks Frau Gernhardt who gets up to adjust the volume on the wireless.

Levi listens to the male voice as it makes an announcement that forces a cold sweat onto his forehead: the formation of a Home Guard that will conscript any man between the ages of sixteen and sixty who is not yet serving in the military. The name – *Volkssturm* – makes Levi shudder as he glances at Farlan who has lost all the colour in his face, and it takes all his will to keep his expression neutral in front of Frau Gernhardt.

“Had you not heard?” she asks them, frowning. “There are posters about it all over the city.”

“No, we’ve had no cause to do the shopping today,” Farlan responds, fitting a strained smile on his lips. “Quite the bit of news, isn’t it?”

Frau Gernhardt turns to glance quickly behind herself before getting up from her seat and walking over to the children’s room and closing the door. When she returns, her expression has grown much more serious.

“I know one should hardly talk about these things,” she says, her voice dropping to a whisper that sounds more than a little hurried, “but quite frankly I don’t know what to think of that. Conscripting more men, and mere boys at that? Something about it doesn’t sit right with me.”

“I guess one could read into it, should one wish to,” Farlan responds, equally quietly and carefully. “One could almost argue there is only one reason for the need for more fighting men.”

“I agree,” Frau Gernhardt says, “though of course just saying it out loud is—”

“Treason,” Levi finishes her sentence. “They’ve put people through the guillotine for less than that.”

“Yes,” Frau Gernhardt says. “I know we all put up a brave face about these things, but I’ve heard rumours, and I’m not the only one either.” She stops to look at them both for a few long seconds, looking suddenly worried.

“It’s alright,” Levi tells her. “You promised you’d keep our secret about Isabel, and we’ll of course do the same for you.”

“I don’t mean to imply anything against the Führer,” Frau Gernhardt continues, “but it strikes me as odd how quiet the papers have been about the war lately, and this whole Volkssturm business just seems to me like... Well, I couldn’t say what exactly, but lately I’ve been wondering whether we might be...”

“Losing the war,” Farlan finishes in a hollow whisper that seems to leave the room as quiet as a grave even with the muffled laughter of the children carrying in from the bedroom.

“It’s a terrible thought, and of course I wish I’m wrong,” Frau Gernhardt finally speaks, “but I’ve been putting two and two together for a while now and I find it difficult to believe that all is right at the front these days.”

“Well, actually, we heard from—”

“All we can really do is hope that this Volkssturm business can turn things in our favour again,” Levi interrupts Farlan before the man can say anything further, guessing how he was going to continue. “I mean, every man from sixteen to sixty? That must mean lots of new people ready to fight.”

“Yes,” Frau Gernhardt says, quietly and somewhat hesitantly. “I suppose it is all we can do.”

“And we’ll of course do what is expected of us. Won’t we, Friedrich?”

Farlan looks frozen in place for a few seconds, turning his cup in his hands before he finally nods. “Yes, of course. Anything for the Fatherland.”

“Yes,” Frau Gernhardt says again, her expression growing ever more distant. “I suppose that is what people want to hear now.”

Once they’re back in their own small kitchen Levi can sense Farlan’s anguish in his persistent silence, but doesn’t address it, simply handing the man a cup of tea which he leaves on the table; it’s still untouched by the time Levi has finished his.

“Why would you say a thing like that to her?” Farlan finally asks, consternation etched on his features. “Didn’t you hear what she was saying? She’s just as disillusioned with all of this as—”

“No, she isn’t,” Levi argues, pausing to listen whether the sound of footsteps in the stairwell are made by Isabel returning home. “I wouldn’t trust her with the truth no matter what she says, and I would certainly not trust her with anything regarding Erwin.”

“But she has already guessed that the war—”

“Thinking it and wishing it are two very different things, Farlan,” Levi reminds the man. “What were you going to say to her, that we’re not going to take part in any of this Volkssturm nonsense since the war’s been lost already?”

“Well what *are* we going to do?” Farlan asks, sounding desperate and angry. “We can’t just enlist!”

“Of course not,” Levi agrees, running his hands through his hair in frustration. “I don’t know. I don’t know what we’re supposed to do.” His thoughts go to Erwin only to be interrupted by Farlan’s sudden groaning.

“Is this it?” Farlan’s voice is lifeless and hoarse. “Is this how it ends for us?”

“No, it isn’t,” Levi argues stubbornly, though he’s not sure what the way out of this could be, or if there can be one. “I’ll talk to Erwin. He’ll know much more about this. He’ll think of something, I’m sure he will.”

“I hope you’re right,” Farlan tells him quietly, burying his face in his hands. “Why did this have to happen? Why couldn’t they just leave us alone?”

Levi wants to say something comforting, but knows there is nothing that would make the situation better. Besides, he can’t argue with what Farlan has said; this announcement is the worst bit of news Levi has heard in years even if it does mean the Nazis are getting desperate. Avoiding suspicion about the reasons they were supposedly rejected by the military has been difficult enough – and Levi isn’t looking forward to starting all that fake coughing again – but it seems as though coming up with explanations for getting excluded from something that accepts sixteen-year-old boys as soldiers will be all but impossible.

The problem is fresh on Levi’s mind as he makes his way through the city the following day, the red and black posters announcing the formation of the Volkssturm catching his eye at every street corner. Sometimes they’re surrounded by older men who shake their heads and Levi can hear them cursing under their breaths as he walks by. He knows better than to hope for the people to rise against this new order, however; as soon as they catch a glimpse of a uniform in the crowd, the men quickly disperse with wishes of “Heil Hitler”, the fear of arrest assuring their obedience.

So much does the problem occupy Levi’s thoughts that he doesn’t realise to feel that pang of nervousness until he can hear Erwin’s footsteps approaching the door, and he can feel his armpits beginning to itch with sweat as soon as he sees the man standing in front of him. Remembering how awkward and strange everything was before, Levi decides to push past Erwin and into the apartment, trying to get back to how things were before their weekend away together. Erwin doesn’t seem to mind, stepping routinely aside to let Levi pass him and walk straight into the kitchen to put the kettle on, not even stopping to say a quick hello.

“Levi,” Erwin tells him from the doorway as he sits down to wait for the water to boil. “We need to talk–”

“About this whole Volkssturm business. I know,” Levi finishes for the man who joins him at the table, his expression showing concern. “Fucking Nazis won’t let any of us slip through their fingers, will they?”

“I think it’s time to revisit what we discussed at the cottage,” Erwin tells him, his voice serious, “about you all going more permanently into hiding. It seems to me like–”

“I told you, there’s no fucking way I’m going to get caged up like some animal,” Levi protests at once. “You said it yourself, the war could last another year. I’d lose my mind in half that time.”

“Levi,” Erwin sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I know it’s not an ideal solution—”

“That’s putting it fucking mildly.”

“—but it’s the best option, considering your current circumstance. The chances of you and Farlan being successful in feigning your involvement with the Volkssturm are few to begin with, and obviously you actually affiliating yourselves with it is out of the question.”

“I guess they’d do a medical at some point,” Levi guesses and Erwin nods.

“That would be the least of your concerns. Obviously the public isn’t made aware of this, but the people getting conscripted now will be sent forth with substandard equipment and minimal training. They’ll essentially be cannon fodder on both fronts, nothing more than a desperate attempt to boost the morale of the nation, which is dwindling at an alarming rate,” the man explains.

“I’d rather take my chances out there than get—”

“Please, Levi,” Erwin interrupts him sternly, looking hurt as Levi glances at him. “I have to believe you don’t mean that – for both our sakes.”

Levi feels a sting of guilt and falls silent, catching glimpses of Erwin’s worried expression from the corner of his eye. There’s a part of him that wants to agree for Erwin’s sake, and Farlan’s, though he’s not fooled into thinking life in hiding would be much safer than how they get by; that night in May is still fresh in his mind, how the people were dragged onto the street in the middle of the night, how that young man’s desperate attempt to run ended with a bullet through his back. He quietly considers what it would be like to be locked indoors for months, avoiding the windows, sleeping through the days, all the while thinking; thinking about his life, thinking about Berlin, about all the ugliness he has lived through, those heinous moulds he’s been forced to fit into.

“I’m sorry,” Levi finally says, his voice catching for a moment when he looks at Erwin. “I can’t do it. Not yet.”

Erwin sighs wearily and stares past Levi before shaking his head. “We both know I can’t force you,” he finally whispers, “but you have to know I wish you’d reconsider. If you decide to go through with the pretence you should know I will be limited in my ability to help you.”

“Whatever you can do,” Levi tells him, feeling an uneasy sense of relief.

“You’ll need false conscription papers to start with,” Erwin begins to list, “as well as a certificate of the levy you’ve been assigned to, though you won’t be needing that for another couple of weeks. I trust you’ve had some explanation for being rejected by the army?”

“Lung disease,” Levi explains in short. “With Farlan it’s more complicated – I’ve been trying to convince everyone he’s too unstable to be trusted anywhere near a gun.”

“If we stick to that story it might be believable for you two to classify in Levy IV,” Erwin says and it seems to Levi he’s thinking aloud, “though admittedly it would be better if you both had faked a limp since you came to Dresden.”

“Guess it’d look a bit suspicious if we started now,” Levi mutters, relieved to hear Erwin uttering a laugh.

“As recruits in Levy IV you could continue to live in Dresden even after some of the other Volkssturm recruits have been sent to the front,” Erwin explains. “That could buy us some time, but the main problem of the drills still remains. All those conscripted to the Volkssturm will undergo basic military training, sometimes for several hours a day.”

“So you think people will notice if we don’t attend?”

“In a city the size of Dresden, especially with all the refugees, it won’t be inconceivable that you should get lost in the crowd,” Erwin says. “As I understand it you don’t associate yourselves with many of the men in your neighbourhood.”

“I try to avoid them whenever I can,” Levi admits, thinking about Böhmer and Herr Schild; he hasn’t caught more than a glimpse of either of them in months.

“Do you have reason to suspect they might notice your absence?”

Levi shakes his head. “I can’t say for sure,” he admits, “but it doesn’t sound like we have much of a choice.”

“I can find out the training schedule for Levy IV easily enough,” Erwin says, “though I have to admit getting all the necessary papers will be easier said than done. Himmler and Bormann are still fighting over the command of the Volkssturm, and if Bormann wins that’ll mean the SS will have nothing to do with it.”

“So you snooping around their files would look highly suspicious then?”

Erwin nods. “It’s also important that your neighbours will be made to believe you’re both partaking in the training,” he says. “For that to happen you must appear to leave the apartment whenever training is underway.”

“Where should we go?” Levi asks. “Here?”

“I can’t think of any other place,” Erwin admits. “I must stress again how much the success of this course of action depends on sheer luck, Levi. If you were to come here permanently, to stay in hiding until the end of the war I could assure—”

“You sound like a broken record,” Levi tells the man sourly before getting to his feet and rushing over to the stove where the kettle has started to boil. “I know the plan’s not perfect, but I’d rather at least try it before I give up what freedom I have left in this shithole.”

Erwin sighs wearily before uttering, “As you wish” and joining Levi by the counter where he’s pouring hot water into the teapot. “I suppose I ought to be glad about how stubborn you are.”

“I refuse to die, but I refuse a lot of other things as well,” Levi agrees, making Erwin laugh. “You should take what you can get.”

“Yes,” Erwin whispers; Levi can feel the heat of the man’s body against his back. “But please, promise me you’ll rethink your decision should the situation require it.”

Levi meets Erwin’s gaze as he says, “I promise”; the relief in the man’s expression eases the knot in Levi’s stomach.

“It’ll take another couple of weeks for the registration to begin,” Erwin tells him, “which will give me some time to get your papers in order.”

“Thank you,” Levi says, turning his eyes away from the teapot again. “I don’t know—”

“There is no need for you to thank me, Levi,” Erwin replies, his voice suddenly lower than it was before as he takes a step closer. “If it was in my power to devote the rest of my days in the Reich to making sure you survive, I wouldn’t hesitate for a second.”

Levi looks up at Erwin’s face, so sincere in its affection, and feels a wave of agitation taking over himself. He remembers what Erwin said about Levi working for him, how it makes him feel they’re not equals, but to Levi that’s not the case. If anything is making them unequal it’s this, the way Levi could never hope to repay Erwin for even a fraction of what he’s done for him already, how limited and insignificant are the ways in which Levi can help Erwin, though they both feel the same pain and live the same lies. In a flash Levi is reminded of every clumsy attempt of his to ease that hurt and he wishes he could do it all again, though he doesn’t know how he could do any more than he did back then.

“I’ll do it if I have to,” Levi says. “I’ll coop myself up wherever you tell me to, if it comes to that.”

A look of surprise passes across Erwin’s features before they’re filled with a gentle gratitude that makes Levi want to look away; the heaviness drains back into his hands, the yearning to pull Erwin closer, to pull him onto the bed where their bodies could stay pressed together for a lifetime in a quarter hour, fifteen minutes’ worth of their own little world.

“I wish I could adequately express how happy it makes me to hear those words, Levi,” Erwin whispers, his hand falling on Levi’s shoulder. “I can only imagine what it would take for you to do that.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “Like I said,” he starts, “I’m stubborn as hell. If it comes to choosing between the cage and death, I choose the cage.”

“A wise choice,” Erwin agrees, reaching over Levi to pick up the pot. “We shouldn’t let the tea get cold.”

There's something of the days before the cottage in the way they sit and have their tea, Levi on the sofa and Erwin in his chair, and in the way Levi gets on with his work after. Erwin doesn't say a word about it, merely sits by his secretaire and types out his documents, as if having sensed Levi's discomfort during their last meeting. The silence between them is suddenly easy again, though Levi can feel the change in how Erwin looks at him, the hint of sadness in his eyes when he wishes Levi goodbye, as if he wants to ask him to stay but doesn't know how.

They carry on like this for the next two weeks, never speaking about their time at the cottage though Levi can tell it's on both their minds, and he can tell Erwin's body is full of that same want, to be close, to kiss, to explore new ways into each other's pleasure. Whenever Levi changes the sheets he thinks about it, and the night he spent sleeping next to Erwin here, but Farlan's words won't leave him be, reminding him time and again how real it would make this, how tangible their connection would grow, and how vulnerable to breaking all at once. And Erwin still casually touches him, brushes his hand against Levi's shoulder as they walk past each other, presses into him when they're preparing dinner, but though Levi's fingers itch to do the same, his hands won't leave their tasks to give Erwin that reassurance that Levi can tell he needs more and more after every visit that sees the distance between them remain as unwavering as ever.

It takes Erwin until the first days of November to secure their false papers which he hands to Levi over the table as they sit down for a heavy meal of roast chicken and potatoes.

"Keep them with you at all times," Erwin orders Levi as he folds up the papers and places them in the pocket of his trousers. "I had to ask Darlett for his assistance, but as far as the records go everything should be in order now."

"And what did he want in return?" Levi asks, making Erwin laugh.

"Nothing, surprisingly enough," he replies, "though he did remind me of the mission again. He said it's best carried out sooner rather than later."

"About that," Levi says, his mouth full of chicken; they've not spoken about it since that weekend at the cottage. "He never told me who the target is."

"Ah, I suppose he wouldn't want to get into that," Erwin answers, his brows furrowing. "Some years ago one of the British operatives stationed here in the Reich decided to go over to the side of the enemy. The reasons are still unclear to us all, but the information he revealed led to the deaths of many of Darlett's contacts in Berlin."

"If it's so personal why doesn't Darlett off the man himself?"

"As far as I know Darlett, he's always looking for that additional advantage," Erwin explains. "I suppose he sees his odds for earning a higher rank growing should he be seen as leading the mission that results in the rogue operative's death rather than acting as a mere foot soldier, so to speak."

“And your superiors – central, or whatever you call it – they’ve agreed to this? Killing one of their own people?”

“Attempts at taking the operative into captivity alive have failed repeatedly in the past,” Erwin says, “so central has been left with no choice but to issue a kill order instead.”

“Won’t that mean he’ll be waiting for an attack?” Levi asks now, sinking his fork into the tender meat of the chicken and shoving the loose strip into his mouth.

“He may not be aware of the kill order,” the man continues, “and even if he is, he may not be expecting an attack in Dresden. When he changed sides there were no active operatives in the city – the location was deemed undesirable, being home to the Gestapo headquarters.”

Levi nods along, savouring the taste of butter on his tongue for a moment before speaking again. “So what of this mission then? What’s the plan?”

“I’m still working out the finer details,” Erwin admits, “but Darlett’s contacts have informed him of a possible timeframe – a parade the target will most likely be joining the day after tomorrow.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “That doesn’t leave us with much time,” he says sourly and Erwin agrees.

“No, indeed it does not,” he muses, “but such is the nature of this work. Quick thinking is often necessary.”

“A parade, though,” Levi thinks aloud. “Lots of people will be there. Kids and such.”

“Yes, I understand it isn’t ideal,” Erwin admits, “and if you’ve changed your mind I do understand.”

“No,” Levi hurries to put in, thinking about Darlett’s threat, which he has kept from Erwin. “I’ll do it. I knew what I got myself into with this, so I might as well do what I’m supposed to. Just tell me where to be and when.”

“I’ve planned a position for you approximately 800 metres from the parade route on top of an abandoned residential building,” Erwin explains. “It is true the Gewehr 43 isn’t the most reliable weapon when it comes to long range shooting, but from what I’ve seen of your skill I don’t expect the distance to be a problem.”

“And how am I supposed to get the rifle there?”

“You won’t,” Erwin says. “I’ll arrange for someone to have it in place before you arrive. The parade starts at midday, but to avoid being seen immediately prior to the event I would suggest getting there well ahead of time.”

“And afterward I just climb on down from the roof?” Levi asks, making Erwin nod.

“It would be ideal for us to rendezvous here after the mission,” he says. “You may use whatever route you wish, but I can also outline some possibilities for you, should you need

it.”

“I think I know the city well enough,” Levi says and scoffs.

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, his expression growing serious. “I wish I could join you, make sure you’re—”

“A big man like you?” Levi interrupts him. “There’s not a chance in hell we’d stay unnoticed. Isn’t that what all this sharpshooter rubbish is about?”

Levi is relieved to hear Erwin laugh again. “I suppose you’re right,” he admits. “I’ll wait for you here then, and hope for the best.”

They spend the rest of the evening going over the details and when Levi sets out from his apartment early on Saturday morning, he feels calmer and more prepared than before any mission so far. He keeps thinking back to the map of the area that Erwin showed him before he took his leave, the location of the hideout as well as the routes Erwin marked down for his eventual return. He finds the abandoned building easily enough – a rundown three-storey structure in a neglected part of town, surrounded on three sides by narrow alleyways – and circles it to find a rusty old fire escape behind it. He climbs up to the roof in the dim light, crouching down to creep along the raised ledge and finding a quilt spread out by the corner, the rifle positioned next to it on the flat roof.

Levi lies down on the blanket, looking up at the sky that’s only now starting to light up, and waits for the nerves to set in. The city is quiet below him save for a rusty squeaking sound and a window being slammed somewhere further down the street where a squat row of working class houses lines the worn cobbled stones. It’s hard for Levi to imagine a parade marching by less than a kilometre from here, with people crowding around it to see the faux glory of the Reich, which he knows is about to turn to nothing, piles of ashes where whole cities still stand. The thought makes him smile to the sky and eases his nervousness; there’s something soothing about doing this again, being a part of the fight, and he remembers again what it was about Erwin that drew Levi to him so irrevocably.

The day seems to pass slowly, the street underneath stays nearly as calm as it was when Levi took his position with the exception of a few footsteps dragging along the stones, as if their owners were hoping they’d never get to where they are going. Some hours before midday, Levi starts to feel cold and hungry and he wishes he could walk around the roof to keep warm. Instead he rolls onto his stomach and tests the scope of the rifle, quickly counting the birds in a distant tree before laying the gun beside him again. He tries to pass the time by looking for shapes in the wisps of clouds above him, like Erwin and Isabel said they used to do when they were children, but it seems he lacks their imagination, for all he can see are leaves and feathers.

He can hear the parade long before he can see it; in the cool clear autumn air all sounds seem to carry much further than normally. He peers through the scope at the scattering of people who have gathered along the parade’s designated route; much fewer than Levi imagined but then it’s hardly a prime spot like the main streets. It makes Levi feel more at ease; he doesn’t want some unsuspecting child to be enjoying the show just to have to witness someone being shot right in front of them. It seems he won’t be able to avoid that entirely – among the taller

figures of women and old men he spots more than one smaller person sprinting in the midst of the crowd.

There's an odd calmness about this mission, not a dull one like at Lilian's party but something almost comfortable, something that allows Levi to breathe and prepare as he watches the soldiers marching past and waits. Even from this distance he can make out their faces, though their features start to blur before long as Levi lets the individuals drown into a sea of uniforms in his mind; it's much easier that way, to imagine every one of those men helping people on board trains on platforms, or pulling old couples out of their beds in the middle of the night to take them to Münchner Platz to be executed – and are they not part of what makes that possible?

The car drives slowly out of the curve in the road, top down despite how cool the day is, and Levi spots the man instantly. He's sitting on the left hand side, an officer's peaked cap sitting atop his balding head as he turns this way and that, taking in the gathered public lazily while chatting with another officer seated to his right. Levi pulls the rifle more firmly against that soft spot between his shoulder and his chest, the one Erwin pressed his hand against to shield him from further injury, and suddenly Levi's thinking of Erwin, pacing around the apartment in nervous anticipation no doubt, waiting to hear from Levi. He lines up the shot calmly, aiming for the chest – a much better likelihood of a hit, even if the chances for recovery from an injury like that are higher as well. Levi can see the dull gleam of the buttons on the man's coat as he moves his finger on the trigger, brushing it against the cool metal once and wondering why this feels so easy and so right before securing his hold and squeezing gently.

Levi keeps his eye on the target long enough to see the car veer violently to the right, almost running over the people who have begun to scream in horror. He catches the growing red stain on the man's fleshy chest, taking in the sudden slackness of the figure before placing the gun back on the roof exactly where he found it and crawling across to the fire escape, keeping in the shade of the high ledges until he can climb down, the roar of engines in the distance making his feet speed up on the rungs. The narrow alley below is empty and Levi crosses quickly to the corner, thinking to follow the quieter passageways further from the building, until someone bumps hard against his side.

Levi turns around instantly, painfully aware of the commotion of the parade ground moving closer but ready to face off the threat, to fight off whoever has caught him to ensure their permanent silence, expecting to have use for Erwin's instructions again. What his eyes meet instead is a young woman, thin to the point of appearing near skeletal within the dark overcoat wrapped around her, the eyes that stare back at Levi seeming almost twice their normal size above the hollowed cheeks. She's holding a solitary apple in her hand, and underneath the bushy tangled mess of her hair Levi can just make out a glimpse of yellow: the star.

They look at each other, measuring and examining until Levi breaks the connection and glances behind himself where the roar of running footsteps is just beginning to sound out. The woman looks toward the noise as well and then back at Levi, then up toward the roof and back at Levi again. She seems to understand but doesn't speak, simply shuffles her feet for a moment before stepping aside, leaning against the red brick wall as Levi walks past.

“Sholem,” Levi whispers under his breath, though he doesn’t know why, barely hearing the woman’s gasp of a response as he speeds up his steps along the empty alleyway.

He walks through the city and further from the scene of his crime, stopping for a good ten minutes to wait in the shadows of an archway several streets from Erwin’s apartment to make sure he isn’t being followed. He takes a longer route just in case, coming up to the building from the north after walking around the neighbourhood, making another few stops along the way before finally walking up the steps and knocking on Erwin’s door.

It’s only after Levi has taken a seat on Erwin’s sofa that he can let it all come back to him and try to understand what he has done. In the safety brought by Erwin’s presence he relives the mission, the heaviness of the weapon in his hands, the serene coolness of the autumn air, the mass of soldiers turned people by the scope of the rifle, and the rush of excitement mixed with nausea when he finally squeezed the trigger. He talks Erwin through it, just like he did that night in the Gestapo cell, to get it out of his head, to make it a thing they’ve shared.

“How do you feel?” Erwin finally asks, and Levi shrugs.

“Like I should be feeling a lot more guilty than I do,” he admits quietly. “What kind of a person can do what I just did and not feel bad about it afterward?”

Erwin looks at him for a few seconds, frowning, with pity in his eyes. “I have struggled with that myself,” he tells Levi softly. “After all the things I’ve done, all the lives I have taken, how can I still think of myself as a good person?”

“How can you?” Levi asks him and Erwin sighs.

“I have to keep believing,” he says, “that I’m on the right side in this fight. It doesn’t do to have illusions about what war is like. Sometimes you have to sacrifice your morals for the greater good.”

“For the greater good,” Levi repeats. “I’ve never been able to see things like that, the bigger picture.”

“Will you trust the one I see?”

Erwin’s question makes Levi look up to his face and take in those features that have grown so familiar, so steady, so synonymous with what Levi understands as protection. He nods slowly, following Erwin with his eyes as he stands up and walks across the space between, extending his hand.

“Come,” he says to Levi; a calming, steadfast sound in the half-darkness.

He lets Erwin lead him into the bedroom, lets him kneel down in front of him to pull off his worn work boots and socks; the effects of seeing Erwin on his knees before him are fast on Levi’s body. When the man stands up again, Levi’s hands fall quickly on the buttons of his shirt while Erwin watches his fingers working, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

“I thought a bath would—”

“That’s not what I want,” Levi tells him in a hoarse whisper, guiding Erwin’s hands back to their previous task and mimicking their movements with his own until they’re both standing naked in front of each other.

They climb onto the bed exposed by the soft light still shining through the veil of drizzling rain that starts to pool into heavy drops on the surface of the window. Levi takes his place sitting on Erwin’s thighs, leans forward and kisses him, on the lips, on the chin, along the stubbly skin of his neck. He can feel Erwin’s uncertainty in the way his hands lie by his sides, heavy and useless, and Levi takes them into his, drawing a map on his body with them; along the thighs, almost tickling his sides in their feather-lightness, down his back and up to his face, thumb tracing his thin lips left wet by Erwin’s mouth. He can feel Erwin twitching against his palm as their kisses grow impatient, eyes drinking in the sight of each other’s bodies, so much more defined and intelligible in the light of day. Erwin’s touches never stray beyond the borders Levi has traced for him, but his longing is fast in his fingers and the way his gaze travels on Levi, growing restless as Levi’s pace along him quickens and he finishes, hands gripping Levi’s thighs, cheeks flushed, gasping foreign swears that make Levi grow aware of the amount of light in the room again.

He watches Erwin for another long moment, taking in the easy smile, the heaviness of his lids as they fall to hide that blue, the gentleness of his expression as he brushes his knuckles against Levi’s cheek. It makes Levi fight against the side of himself that wants to run, wants to hide his preference behind the closed door of the bathroom – a losing battle, this time. As he leans against the wall, Levi lets his head fall back and thinks about Erwin on the other side of the door, traces of the mess the man made on his hand helping him along and mingling with Levi’s own sooner than he expected. Levi washes his hands quickly with that lavender soap before returning to the bed between the sheet and Erwin, who says nothing about his absence as Levi presses his ear against the low vibrations of his speech.

“I never meant to imply that–”

“You worry too much,” Levi interrupts him, feeling the murmur of Erwin’s laughter against his cheek.

“Yes, I’ve been accused of that before,” Erwin admits, stretching out his body for a few seconds before bringing his hand to rest on top of Levi’s head again. “Marie used to say I reminded her of her mother in that.”

Levi scoffs. “Maybe that’s why you two aren’t married,” he remarks, relieved to hear Erwin laughing again.

“Perhaps,” he agrees, “though admittedly that’s not one of the reasons she gave.”

Levi falls quiet for a while, picturing the situation, feeling a sudden knot in his chest as he whispers, “Are you in love with her?”

“I thought I was,” Erwin says quietly. “Now I’m not so sure.”

Levi breathes in the scent of Erwin’s sweat and takes in those words and what they mean, wondering distantly how he found his way back to this. He still knows what the distance

would be for; to keep him safe, to give this thing with Erwin the proportions Levi is comfortable with, to make sure when it ends he'll feel only a fraction of the sadness he sees in Farlan every day. Pretence on top of pretence, and Levi has had enough of that; it never belonged between him and Erwin anyway.

"There's something I want to tell you, Levi."

Erwin's tone is suddenly serious and it makes Levi lift his head to lean his chin against the hands resting on the man's chest. "What's that then?"

"Some time ago while I was still living in Berlin Marie asked something of me," Erwin starts before pausing for a few seconds, a look of deep regret in his eyes. "You have to understand, before I met you my life was very different. Holtz was... Well, he was more present, even when he didn't have to be. I suppose you could say he was growing to be a part of me, though I don't want to sound like I'm trying to find excuses for what I did."

Levi can feel his brows knitting over his eyes as he says, "What did she ask for?"

"She knew a family in the city," Erwin explains. "A Jewish family. She asked me to help them escape."

"You refused," Levi realises, remembering the fragment of the letter again – *no matter how my morals may compel me*.

"I made the wrong choice," Erwin says. "Civilian rescue was never meant to be a part of the operation, and those were the orders I followed. But ever since I met you I can't stop thinking about those people and where they ended up – whether they found someone else to help them or whether they were caught and deported to the east."

The question boils in Levi's mind, the one he's been asking himself for years, aching to know the answer but dreading it all at once. When it escapes his lips it's as a hollow whisper: "What's in the east, Erwin?"

The expression on Erwin's face is like something Levi's never seen before, quiet rage and immeasurable sadness under a veil of pity as he looks at Levi and asks, "Are you sure you want to know?"

Levi nods and Erwin tells him, takes Levi from the train platform to the gates of the camps and beyond, past the phrases bearing false hope, into overcrowded barracks and rock quarries and factories and disinfection rooms, into warehouses full of shoes and rings and suitcases, into gas chambers and crematoria and mass graves. Levi's body grows cold, his mind rages against the images Erwin's words create; it's what he's feared and so much worse, something even he with all his distrust for the world couldn't have thought of, an evil so extreme it leaves him speechless. In a flash he sees the misery of his life, his fear when his uncle didn't come home, the struggle to make a measly living out of odd jobs, the continuous fight to keep Farlan and Isabel fed, to keep them safe, what Krieger has done to him, and he realises: he's lucky, immeasurably lucky, so fortunate it defies all reason, and suddenly the memory of meeting Erwin makes Levi want to believe in God.

“You can’t fully understand it,” Erwin whispers, “until you’ve seen it for yourself.”

Levi doesn’t speak; the warmth of Erwin’s body is under him, the one solid safety that exists in this moment, and Levi presses his face against it, trying not to think.

“My father believed in education as a cure for the evils of this world,” Erwin goes on. “He said only through studying history can we learn to not repeat it, and on those grounds he attacked my choice of a military career. It’s the only consolation I have regarding his death: that he didn’t live long enough to see how far from his ideal humanity has fallen.”

“Promise me,” Levi says, his voice sounding strange in his ears, “that you’ll never tell Farlan and Isabel.”

Erwin strokes Levi’s cheek gently for a few seconds before whispering, “I promise.”

Levi falls deeper into Erwin’s scent, pinning his own leg under Erwin’s thigh and holds onto this, the soft afternoon light, the soft embrace of the sheets, the softness of Erwin’s fingers as they tangle into his hair. Levi holds on to it, that there are things such as this, that there is sense and reason in living because of things like this. He glances at Erwin’s face, imagines for a moment the sadness the man would feel if Levi... No, it couldn’t come to that, Levi won’t let it; he decides it then and there and for good.

A loud knock carrying in from the door pushes them apart and into their clothes, hands flying through ruffled hair to smooth it into something that could pass as respectable on a Saturday. Levi turns back to the bed as Erwin leaves the room, listening as he straightens the sheets and pillows and pulls the counterpane over all of it just as Erwin returns to the sitting room with Lilian hard on his heels.

“What I don’t understand is why you come to me with this,” the man says with the roughness of Holtz suddenly in his voice. “You have hundreds of friends, Lilian. Why don’t you ask any of them to help?”

“Do you think I trust those snakes in the grass?” she hisses at him, lighting a cigarette angrily while Erwin sits down in the armchair. “Half of them won’t return my calls now. Suddenly I’ve been turned into a fucking pariah overnight.”

“And what do you want me to do about it?” Erwin asks her, sounding impatient as he too lights a smoke. “I’m just a glorified secretary, remember?”

“Oh, would you get over that already?” she snaps at him. “You’re acting like a petty schoolgirl—”

“What do you want me to do?” Erwin interrupts her angrily. “If they’ve arrested your husband I can only assume they have their reasons, and those have nothing to do with me.”

“They say my testimony isn’t reliable because ‘Of course I’ll vouch for his whereabouts, I’m his wife’,” Lilian says, assuming a mocking tone for the end of her sentence. “Fucking bureaucrats. You know none of them have done a measly fraction of what Wolfgang has done for this country.”

“You’re rambling, and I’m getting bored,” Erwin states. “If all you want is someone to complain to I suggest you call your sister.”

“What am I supposed to do now?” Lilian asks him shrilly. “They’ve frozen our assets, I have two children to feed, how am I supposed to—”

“By climbing down from your palace of an apartment and finding work,” Erwin tells her matter-of-factly. “It’s what the rest of us have been doing since the dawn of time. It’s time you joined us here in the gutter.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Lilian replies; through the open door Levi can see her pacing back and forth.

“What choice do you have?” Erwin reminds her. “What did you think I’d say? ‘Sure, bring the kids here, we’ll live as a happy family and I will take care of you until your husband gets out of prison’?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m at the end of my—”

“Forget it, Lilian,” Erwin interrupts her, putting out his cigarette. “I’m done letting you treat me like I’m some servant you can call in whenever there’s something you need. You chose Wolfgang and now you’ll have to live with it. It’s as simple as that.”

Levi can see the rage on her features as she looks down at Erwin, her eyes flashing only once in Levi’s direction as she drops her cigarette on the floor and turns on her heels; the slamming of the door echoes in the stairwell even when Levi walks out of the bedroom and stops in front of Erwin who has buried his face in his hands.

“There are things,” he mutters into the space behind his fingers, “that are hard to fit into the bigger picture.”

Levi watches as the veiled sun draws lines of silver into Erwin’s hair and reaches out his hand; he pulls the man close, here in the light of day, Erwin’s lips against the beating of his heart.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- death

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Have an Easter surprise! I'm not sure about the next update yet because I have major Uni deadlines in April but I'll say something about chapter 16 on tumblr and twitter at some point as soon as my schedule clears up.

EDIT: Chapter 16 will be posted on 15 April.

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!

I'm also on [twitter](#)!

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi closes the door quietly behind himself, sneaking down the stairs as soundlessly as he can before exiting the building. The cobbled stones of the street shine grey in the predawn light as Levi starts making his way through the quietly humming city, passing scores of women standing in queues in front of bakers' shops that have yet to open their doors for the day. He lifts up the collar of his coat against the chilly breeze that moves between the houses and whistles around the high dome of the Frauenkirche as Levi continues past it, thinking back to the warmth of Erwin's bed and shivering against the cold.

Since the mission nearly two weeks ago, the weather has taken a turn towards winter, and Levi can't help but resent the change, never having liked the cold; even as a child he felt it took something from him, ate away at some crucial reserve of energy he barely managed to build up during the months when food was cheaper and therefore more common a sight at his uncle's table. Though he's stronger now than he was before, with a house and a bed to keep him warm, Levi can still remember the constant discomfort of his past, the way he used to curl up under the loose knit of his quilt, desperate for the warmth of skin and body, even if it was just his own.

The breeze grows into a strong wind as Levi crosses the Augustus Bridge, rushing into his face through the sudden open space, making him narrow his eyes and grit his teeth as he thrusts his hands deeper into his pockets. It doesn't help much; by the time he has walked past the factories his fingers have reached that state between aching and numb and he can feel the tip of his nose has started to do the same. As he nears the door to his apartment building, Levi's thoughts turn to his own bed where Farlan is no doubt still asleep, covers drawn to his chin to keep out the cold created by Levi's absence. Just as his stiff fingers close around the

handle of the door, Levi hears someone calling out for Herr Weller, and turns around to see Böhmer crossing the street to talk to him.

“Fancy running into you so early,” the older man says, swaying back and forth between his heels and his toes. “Back from a night of frivolity?”

“Work,” Levi corrects him, bringing his hand to his face and coughing into his fist.

“Ah, yes,” Böhmer voices, scratching the patchy stubble on his chin. “I heard you’re some sort of a cleaner.”

“Housekeeper,” Levi corrects again.

“For the Sturmbannführer, yes?” the old man asks and Levi nods. “I’m sure I’m not the first to say it’s an odd choice of work for a man.”

“Puts food on the table same as any other,” Levi counters, turning his face toward his coat collar and coughing again. “Indoor work. Good for my health.”

“Yes,” Böhmer says again. “A strange hour to be cleaning, don’t you think?”

“The Sturmbannführer will be leaving for the front soon,” Levi fibs calmly; and for all he knows it’s not very far from the truth. “There’s a lot that he wants sorted out before then.”

“So you’ll be out of a job then,” the man muses, his wide mouth twisting to something resembling a smile. “Well, I suppose it won’t matter much – you’ll get to join him soon enough no doubt.”

Levi tries to smile as well, hoping the cold will explain the crooked half-expression he manages. “Remains to be seen, but you may be right.”

“I guess we’re all eager to get our orders,” Böhmer says and coughs out a laugh. “Even if at my age it’s... Well, I’m sure the officers know better than I do. Which levy were you assigned to?”

Levi feels like grimacing at the question, but forces that faux politeness to sit steady on his features as he simply utters. “Four. Friedrich and I both.”

Böhmer’s eyes grow large with surprise before narrowing to a squint that makes Levi feel uncomfortable. “Really?” the man asks. “Levy four? Both of you?”

“That’s what they told us,” Levi says, shrugging and coughing into his hand again. “I suppose no one wants to be on patrol with someone who can’t keep quiet for longer than five seconds.”

“Yes,” Böhmer mutters, sounding all but convinced. “But still, you have to excuse me for saying it seems a bit strange. Young men like you two...”

“Infirmary doesn’t care about age,” Levi tries to remind the man and coughs more loudly.

“No, I suppose not...” he mumbles, shooting a few glances at Levi from under his furrowed brows. “Well, I best let you get to bed. You must be tired from... the work.”

Levi nods a quick goodbye, the pause in Böhmer’s words filling him with unease as he climbs up the steps, getting no further than the second floor landing before running into Frau Niemeyer. The old woman is wrapped up in a heavy fur coat and what look like several shawls and she’s clutching a wicker basket in her hands, squinting at Levi’s face in the dark stairwell.

“This is no time to be getting home, Herr Weller,” she tells him sourly. “This is a respectable neighbourhood. We don’t want any of that here.”

“I’m sorry, Frau Niemeyer,” he apologises, though he wishes he could tell the woman to mind her own fucking business. “If it helps, I’m coming home from work.”

The old woman sneers sullenly. “Well, I suppose that’s better then. But keep in mind that’s no way for decent folk to behave. We don’t want any trouble here, and steps can always be taken if someone doesn’t follow the rules.”

“Understood,” Levi replies, trying to sound like he’s taking the words much more lightly than he is. “Thank you for the reminder.”

Frau Niemeyer waves her hand at him dismissively before muttering a quiet “Heil Hitler” and starting to walk down the stairs just as Levi continues up and enters the apartment, which is full of Isabel’s quiet snoring. The kitchen feels warmer than Levi expected as he walks through it to the bedroom, the reason suddenly clear when he finds Farlan sitting in bed, awake and reading a book, a pot of tea and a mug on a tray placed next to him.

“You’re up,” Levi remarks, stretching his arms above his head and yawning widely before bending down to take off his shoes.

“I couldn’t sleep,” Farlan explains in short, a hint of apology in his voice; they both know he’s been doing this more and more lately. “There’s still some tea in the pot, if you’d like a cup.”

Levi nods tiredly, carrying his work boots over to the heater, stopping to peer down onto the street through a gap in the curtains. He can see Frau Niemeyer and Böhmer, deep in conversation, and somehow he feels as if their eyes keep shifting back to their bedroom window more often than Levi is comfortable with.

“What is it?” Farlan asks, but Levi shakes his head.

“Nothing,” he says and takes a seat on the bed, sticking his cold feet against Farlan’s; it makes the man flinch and swear.

“Careful where you put those,” Farlan scolds him gently, marking the page of his book and laying it aside as Levi pours himself a cup, letting the warm porcelain thaw out his fingers. “It’s getting so cold again. What do you think the clothes’ rationing is going to be like this winter?”

“Worse than last year,” Levi says at once. “At least we have more money now, though who knows how much that will help.”

Farlan agrees quietly, picking up the book again and riffling through the pages nervously for a few seconds before uttering, “When do we need to go again?”

“Monday,” Levi tells him, trying to sound calming but failing to ease the tension on Farlan’s features. “Eight hours. It’ll be just like last time.”

The man nods and sighs, pressing the palms of his hands against his eyes for a few seconds before looking at Levi again. “I don’t know,” he mutters. “I feel like it’s all coming back again. Getting that letter and leaving Berlin, all this time we’ve spent here, and Christofer—”

“It’s alright,” Levi interrupts him. “So much has happened. It gets to me too sometimes.”

“I know,” Farlan tells him, rubbing at his forehead. “But I was doing so much better already, I was doing my part and now...”

“You’ve always done more than you think,” Levi reminds the man again. “Besides, who’s to say things are going to get to like they were before? This Volkssturm shit took us all by surprise. Maybe you just need to get used to the idea.”

“Maybe,” Farlan says, though he doesn’t sound very hopeful, and he changes the subject immediately after. “You spent the night again.”

Levi thinks back to the peacefulness of the sleep from which he woke that morning, Erwin’s arm around him, Erwin’s body pressed against his, the smell of cigarettes mixing with the scent of sweat in the warmth of the bed. Erwin woke with Levi to wish him goodbye with kisses and tender touches that left Levi aching for more.

“That’s the third time in two weeks,” Farlan remarks, a small smile playing on his lips.

“You’re keeping count now?” Levi asks him, sipping at his tea. “I thought you said you didn’t understand why I wouldn’t.”

“And I still don’t,” the man tells him. “If it were me I’d be there every night. I’d take all my things there and never leave.”

Levi scoffs. “I know you would,” he says, smiling at Farlan’s apologetic grin but growing quickly serious. “Erwin’s been talking to me about that.”

“About you moving in?” Farlan asks, looking shocked until Levi shakes his head.

“About how we should go into hiding,” Levi explains. “He says we could stay in his apartment, that it would be safer for us to.”

“So why don’t we?”

Levi sighs. “I know it’s probably the right thing to do,” he says, “but I can’t stand the idea of getting locked up like that, and I’m sure neither could Isabel.”

“But if it will keep us safe won’t it be worth it?” Farlan insists. “And if Erwin thinks it’s for the best—”

“I’ve talked about it with him, and we’ve come to an agreement,” Levi says, stopping to drink his tea. “Unless something drastic happens, we’ll go when Erwin leaves Dresden.”

“And when will that be?” Farlan asks, looking displeased with Levi’s shrug. “Don’t you think this is something you should have agreed on with me and Isabel rather than with Erwin?”

Levi pinches the bridge of his nose. “You know we all need to go at the same time,” he tries to explain. “It’ll take planning in any case, and people will notice when we suddenly disappear. I don’t want to leave them with lots of time to miss us.”

“And how exactly is that something you can take into consideration?”

“Erwin says the war will last a year, probably less,” Levi tells him. “He showed me the positions of the front lines on a map. The allied forces are already at the borders of the Reich.”

“So you think the later we go, the less time people will have to look for us?” Farlan asks to understand, and Levi nods.

“Just think about it, though,” he says. “This time next year the war could be over.”

Farlan shakes his head. “I know we’ve talked about it so many times before,” he says, “but even now it seems impossible. What will the world be like after this? What *can* it be like?”

“I don’t know,” Levi admits, finishing his tea in one large gulp. “Most likely people will go back to being exactly like they were before.”

Farlan frowns. “I don’t think so,” he says. “I don’t think any of us can go back to the way things were.”

There’s a quiet creaking sound behind Levi, and he turns to see Isabel standing at the door, scratching her hair and yawning before crossing the room, the woolly socks on her feet softening her footsteps as she pads across the floor and climbs into the bed, sticking her legs under the covers next to Farlan and Levi’s.

“Did we wake you?” Levi asks her quietly as she yawns again and shakes her head.

“Bad dream,” she explains, rubbing at her eyes and pulling the blanket further over her lap. “Do you ever get those, big brother?”

“Sometimes,” Levi admits, looking at the girl’s sleep-ruffled hair and smiling.

“What about you Farlan?”

The man shrugs. “I never remember my dreams,” he says, though something about his tone of voice leaves Levi wondering whether he’s telling the truth. “If I did they’d probably be about something silly, like baking a gugelhupf and burning it.”

“What are your bad dreams about, big brother?” Isabel asks now, turning to Levi who frowns, glancing at Farlan.

“Trains,” he says. “What about yours?”

“Horses, mostly,” Isabel replies, pulling her knees up and burying her face in the arms she hooks around them. “There’s a fire and the horses are screaming and scared. I’m trying to calm them down so I can set them free but they won’t stop kicking at me, and I know something bad is going to happen to them if I don’t set them loose.”

“What’s that?”

Isabel shrugs. “Just something terrible,” she whispers, staring at the headboard for a few seconds of utter silence before turning to Levi again. “Where is Erwin going to go?”

Levi frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I heard you two talking,” Isabel tells him, sounding suddenly almost sullen. “You said we’ll move to Erwin’s apartment when he leaves Dresden. Where is he going to go?”

“To the front,” Levi says, wondering how much of an explanation he needs to give. “To fight in the war.”

Isabel’s eyes grow distant again and she frowns, as if she’s trying to remember something she’s forgotten. “When will he come back?”

“I don’t know,” Levi says, glancing at Farlan. “He hasn’t even left yet. When the war’s over, probably.”

“You said it’ll be over in a year,” Isabel reminds him of his words. “So will Erwin be gone for a whole year?”

“I don’t know,” Levi says again. “You should try not to worry about it.”

“Why do we have to move to Erwin’s apartment?” Isabel asks now. “Why can’t we just stay here? What difference will it make, especially if Erwin’s not even there?”

“You know there are people looking for us, Isabel,” Farlan puts in. “Bad people. It’ll be safer for us to go live at Erwin’s for a while, and pretend we’re not.”

“Pretend we’re not what?”

“Just that we’re... not,” Farlan goes on. “Just be really quiet, and pretend we don’t exist so people won’t come looking for us.”

“Be really quiet for a whole year?” Isabel asks, scoffing. “I’d like to see you try.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean?” Farlan asks her back, making her smirk.

“Just that you can’t keep your mouth shut,” she tells him, chuckling as he turns to look at Levi, his mouth hanging open. “You’re always going on and on, running your mouth about this and that–”

“Can you believe the nerve of this child?” he asks Levi, clicking his tongue. “She has the audacity to tell me that *I* can’t keep *my* mouth shut when all she does all day is tell stories to Hanna and Bruno and go on and on about her U-Boats–”

“Don’t you dare say anything bad about my U-Boats!” Isabel exclaims, reaching over Levi to grab a pillow. “I’m warning you! My nana taught me how to give someone the evil eye, so you should beware!”

“Oh, boo! You and your evil eyes!” Farlan tells her, earning a smack across the face with a pillow.

Levi reaches out quickly to save the teapot, climbing out of the bed to watch the two from the door as they fight, laughing and shrieking and growing breathless, and suddenly Levi realises how much he’s been away, how much he has missed during the hours spent with Erwin. He looks at their reddened cheeks and wide grins as they fall over on the bed, panting and pinching each other, and wonders whether he’s making the right choice by refusing to go into hiding or whether it’s a decision he’ll live to regret.

Levi walks into the kitchen to lay the tray on the table, hearing Farlan and Isabel shuffling in behind him to get started on breakfast. As Levi lifts the cup and pot off the tray he notices it: a plain white envelope with the usual *L. Weller* written neatly on the back. He lifts it up, turning to Farlan in anger.

“I thought I told you to burn these,” he tells the man, who looks surprised at the sudden hostility in his tone. “Why the fuck would you just leave this lying around?”

“Don’t talk to me like that, Levi,” Farlan counters at once. “First of all, I’m not here for you to tell me what to do, and second of all, I’m actually not in the habit of disposing of letters that are so clearly addressed to someone else. If you don’t want them lying around, I suggest you handle that yourself.”

“Who’s sending you letters, big brother?” Isabel asks Levi whose hand has closed around the envelope.

“No one,” he tells her in a sullen whisper as he crosses the room and throws the crumpled remains of the letter onto the embers still glowing warm from when Farlan made his tea.

“You’re upset,” Levi can hear Isabel muttering behind him, and he turns around, catching the uncertainty of her expression for a few seconds before he sits down next to her.

“You shouldn’t worry about it. It’s...” he tells her, feeling like the words are far less helpful than they should be; he can sense Farlan listening intently. “It’s just something I’d rather not think about, but I remember it when I get those letters.”

“I don’t like remembering bad things,” Isabel whispers, meeting Levi’s gaze, her eyes suddenly filled with some sort of determination. “If I see one of those letters, I’ll burn it for you.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Levi tells her, “but you’re right, Farlan. I should do it myself.”

The man looks apprehensive for a moment before dismissing the matter with a shrug. “You told me it’s none of my business. I’m just trying to keep it that way.”

“I know,” Levi tells him. “I’m sorry I ever tried to get you involved.”

“You know I’m here to help,” Farlan says, turning to throw a few logs on the burnt remains of the letter. “With some things. It’d be an entirely different matter if you told me—”

“I won’t,” Levi interrupts him at once as he hears the words, feeling a sting as he thinks about how the two would react. “It’s in the past now. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“In the past,” Farlan repeats in a mumble, poking at the logs. “I guess I’ll just take your word for it.”

“It’s nothing you should worry about,” Levi insists, growing frustrated. “It’s nothing that will affect your life in any way, so you should just forget about it.”

“If you say so,” the man says, straightening his back and looking at Levi. “Erwin knows, doesn’t he?”

Levi answers Farlan’s gaze for a moment before turning his eyes on the table, catching the man’s quiet sneer before Isabel speaks up.

“Can we all do something fun with Erwin today?” she asks. “I don’t think it’s fair that you both get to see him and I don’t.”

“It’s not as if I see much of him, you know,” Farlan corrects her as he lifts the skillet onto the stove. “He’s hardly ever there when I am.”

“Well where is he then?”

“Work,” Levi tells her, though the question makes him wonder.

They’ve spent five days at Erwin’s in the past two weeks, fleeing from their duties in the Volkssturm, and like Farlan said the man has barely been there while they have. Levi has his own key he uses to get them into the apartment, and though they often stay until evening and well past the end of Erwin’s day at the Personalhauptamt, the man generally doesn’t come home until an hour before they leave. Levi never asks him where he has been, or what he has been doing, and in truth he’s hardly considered either of those questions before this, but as soon as he thinks on them that burn of curiosity he felt about Erwin earlier is suddenly restored to its full strength.

“Well can we do something with him tomorrow?” Isabel goes on. “He doesn’t work on the weekend, does he?”

“No,” Levi admits, “but we can’t just all go barging in there whenever we want.”

“Can’t he come here? He did that one time.”

“I’d have to ask him first,” Levi tells the girl, making her sigh as she presses her forehead against the table.

“Why am I always the one who gets left out of things?” she mutters. “You both get to go to Erwin’s all the time and I haven’t gotten to see him in months. It’s not fair.”

Levi glances at Farlan who rolls his eyes before snapping, “It’s not as if I want to go there. Don’t you understand the situation Levi and I are in? Don’t you understand what’s going to happen if people find out we’ve not been doing our training like we’re supposed to?”

Isabel sighs more loudly and covers her head with her arms without saying a word; Farlan watches her for a few seconds before turning back to the skillet to make sure the bread isn’t burning.

“I thought you liked spending more time with Frau Gernhardt and the kids,” Levi says to the girl, who peers at him through a gap between the table and her elbow.

“I do like it,” she replies, “but now she’s going to be sad all the time, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Why is she going to be sad all the time?” Levi asks, frowning at the look Farlan and Isabel share.

“Her husband died,” Farlan tells him, his voice suddenly serious. “She found out just yesterday.”

Levi swears under his breath. “We should get them something,” he suggests at once. “Something special. I could ask Erwin if he could get something from the black market, or maybe you should bake.”

“You should ask Erwin if he can find coffee,” Farlan says. “If there’s one thing we all miss, it’s that.”

“That could be expensive,” Levi says, “but I could always ask. Though it won’t be much of a comfort for the kids.”

Farlan stops to consider the words as he flips the slices of bread over in the pan. “You’re right,” he agrees. “Something sweet would be better. Oh, I’d love to bake a gugelhupf, but we’d need about a hundred things for that...”

“It’s not going to make her feel better,” Isabel suddenly puts in. “Nothing’s going to make her feel better. All she needs is for someone to take care of Hanna and Bruno so they won’t see her cry.”

Levi shares another look with Farlan, who sighs and says, “You’re right, it’s not going to make her feel better, but it is polite, and it will make the neighbours think we’re good,

civilised, well-mannered people, which is exactly what we want them to think. So it's not about Frau Gernhardt, it's about making sure everyone likes us enough not to start looking into our business."

Levi feels a shiver running down his spine at the words; of course what Farlan said is true, but hearing it out loud makes it sound much more cold and calculating than Levi would have thought. He remembers suddenly the hare he gave to Frau Schultz and realises this is no different; the secret they share and Frau Gernhardt's fondness of Isabel change nothing.

"I'll ask Erwin the next time I see him," Levi says quietly, "but we should give her our condolences sooner rather than later."

"We'll stop by the door with whatever I can find," Farlan decides. "It's not polite to go in, make her act like a hostess. But if she looks like she needs help with the children, we'll offer without her having to ask."

After one look at Frau Gernhardt's puffy eyes Levi, Farlan and Isabel agree to watch Hanna and Bruno for a few hours on Saturday to give Frau Gernhardt time to gather her thoughts. To Levi the children seem far less affected by the news, especially Bruno who must have been very young when his father left several years ago, perhaps too young to remember him now. The distracted look on Hanna's face reminds Levi of his mother and the emptiness he felt after she died, a faint memory but one he can still recall.

"It's better for them to be with me now," Frau Gernhardt says when they walk the children down the stairs and back home. "It's better for all of us to be together, to remember that we have each other left. Though how I'm supposed to manage raising two children on my own..."

"If there's ever anything you need," Farlan says quietly, but Frau Gernhardt shakes her head.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I shouldn't say things like that."

"It's—"

"Thank you," she interrupts Farlan, wiping at her reddened nose. "You really are very kind, but I couldn't possibly burden you any more than I already have."

"You, burden us?" Farlan asks her incredulously. "If anything we're burdening you! Sending Isabel here whenever we're away."

"Oh, it's more a relief than a burden, having her here," she assures them hurriedly. "She makes the children laugh, and they need it more than ever now."

It's back at Frau Gernhardt's door where Farlan and Levi say their goodbyes to Isabel as they leave the apartment early on Monday morning, crossing the city through the quieter streets whenever they can, expecting to see men in uniforms approaching after every corner they turn. When they finally reach the end of the street that houses Erwin's apartment, Levi starts

glancing around himself, making sure there are no faces in the dark windows as he leads Farlan down the stairs to the entrance to the network of basements that connects the buildings, the only way out of any of them should they all collapse under heavy bombing. He pulls open the bulky metal door as soundlessly as he can, pulling Farlan along into the darkness that grows complete as he closes the door behind them.

After stopping to listen for a good ten seconds, Farlan hands Levi a torch out of one of the deep pockets of his thick winter coat. The beam of its light illuminates the sparse items in the room: chairs and a bench, a chessboard, a barrel of water in the corner. The rest of the cellars are similar as Levi and Farlan cross them, already dodging the furniture they know to be there, stopping to prick up their ears at each new door they come to and finally slipping up to the ground floor of the right building, hearts pounding as they search for the sound of footsteps and slamming doors as they sneak up the stairs, only being able to sigh with relief as Levi closes the door to Erwin's apartment soundlessly behind them.

"Another successful entry," Erwin greets them in a low, barely audible whisper as they take off their shoes and place them in a small cupboard in the hallway.

"It's good no one in their right mind is awake this fucking early," Levi mumbles back, knowing without looking at Erwin that he's fully dressed and shaved, having gotten out of bed as early as Levi and Farlan have, as is his habit.

"I've already prepared some tea," Erwin tells them both as they walk quietly to the sitting room and take their places around the coffee table. "I thought you would both like some breakfast as well, though as you know, my skills lie mostly outside the kitchen."

"Thanks," Levi whispers, biting hungrily into a sandwich while Farlan crosses his hands in his lap and stares at the secretaire across the room, though it seems to Levi he doesn't really see it.

"It was no problem," Erwin assures them, glancing worriedly at Farlan before turning back to Levi. "I trust you didn't catch anything being out of the ordinary?"

Levi shakes his head. "No Gestapo, no lurkers," he responds, making the man's lips twist to a smile and suddenly thinking to ask, "Had a good weekend?"

For a second Erwin seems taken aback by the question before his smile wavers and he says, "Some moments were better than others."

Osterhaus, Levi thinks at once, and drops the subject.

"And you?" Erwin asks now, addressing his words to both of them but getting no reaction from Farlan. "I hope yours was better than mine."

"The husband of one of our neighbours died," Levi explains. "We helped her with her kids a little on Saturday."

"That was very kind of you," Erwin says, "but then, I'd expect no less – from either of you."

“We’d like to give her something with the condolences,” Levi remembers suddenly. “Do you know where we could get coffee or marmalade or something like that?”

“There’s some coffee left in the cupboard, you can take whatever’s left,” Erwin tells him. “I never really drink it anyway, and it would be a shame to let it go to waste.”

“Thank you,” Levi says, glancing at the man by his side. “It was all Farlan’s idea.”

“I’m not surprised,” Erwin says. “I’ve seldom met people who hold good manners in such high regard.”

Though the words are meant to catch Farlan’s attention, they fail as the man continues to stare, his gaze running slowly down from the secretaire to the floor and finally to his feet. Levi and Erwin both look at him for a few seconds before glancing at each other, eventually leaving the man as he is as Levi pours them a cup of tea each; Farlan’s is still untouched when Erwin leaves the apartment half an hour later. Without knowing what else to do, Levi walks over to the bookshelf and pulls one of the heavy tomes out of its place, handing it to Farlan who accepts it hesitantly, like barely remembering what it’s for.

“There are plenty more of these,” Levi tells him in a whisper. “Might remind you of what it was like before.”

Farlan nods in a strangely solemn way before opening the book on the first page and starting to read, leaving Levi to pace restlessly around the apartment in the nerve-shredding silence that screams to be broken. He keeps an eye on Farlan, vigilant glances that turn half-hearted after the man lies down on his stomach on the sofa and props the book up against the armrest, suddenly ten years younger than he was a mere quarter hour before. Assured by the sudden restfulness of Farlan’s pose, Levi turns his attention on the new curtains drawn over the windows. The fabric is heavier and darker, like meant for keeping out unwanted attention and as he continues his round of the apartment into the bedroom, Levi is suddenly disappointed in having missed Erwin hanging them, imagining the man straining his arms to secure them in place, flexing the broad muscles in his back.

Levi sits down on the bed in the room that seems too dark now with the window closed and the curtain drawn, falling quickly on his back and lifting his legs up from the floor. He meets Farlan’s eyes through the open door between the rooms as the man glances up from his book, raising one of his brows a fraction before turning back to his task. Levi curls up on the bed and breathes deeply, the scent of Erwin’s sweat bringing to his mind the way the man looked when Levi asked about his weekend; drained and discomposed, hiding that anger that Levi can barely see though he knows to look for it. He wonders what it was that Erwin did, letting his thoughts venture further into questions about what the man does when they’re not together, all those evenings spent who knows where. Before he drifts off to sleep, Levi decides to ask Erwin about it the following day, but the thought is gone by the time he wakes to Farlan nudging his shoulder.

“There was a knock on the door,” the man tells him, looking pale but calm, “and someone passed an envelope under it.”

Levi sits up slowly, yawning and rubbing his eyes. "We'll just leave it where it is," he whispers back and Farlan nods curtly. "What time is it?"

"Almost lunchtime," the man tells him, and Levi feels like swearing; so many hours left to kill. "I ate what was left of the sandwiches, so I'm not hungry."

Levi shakes his head and lies back down, a touch surprised to see Farlan doing the same, having insisted on spending the previous times sitting on the floor of the pantry which he claimed was the safest place in the apartment. He brings his face close to Levi's, lowering the volume of his whispers even further.

"I understand what you said about going into hiding," Farlan starts, making Levi frown, "but do you think you might reconsider? I mean... This isn't so bad, is it?"

Levi meets Farlan's eyes for a long moment before looking away, trying to think of the right words but finding nothing better than, "I know you think you'd feel a lot safer living like this, but you know it would change before long."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's no place where we'll be safe while we're in the country, Farlan," Levi tells him calmly. "You'd feel fine here for a few days, a week, and then you'd start jumping every time someone walks up and down the stairs or closes their door or whenever you hear people talking outside."

"You don't know that," Farlan counters, looking a touch insulted, and Levi sighs.

"You're right," he admits, "I don't know that, and if you can honestly tell me that hearing that knock on the door didn't scare the shit out of you we can bring our things here tomorrow for all I care."

The man looks at him in silence for a moment before turning to stare at the ceiling, the silence falling in place for a few minutes before he breaks it by whispering, "That's why it's so difficult to imagine this ending."

"Why?" Levi asks, making Farlan turn back to him again.

"I can't remember what it was like to not be afraid," he says, a quivering smile twisting his lips for a second before fading again. "It seems stupid not to have been, before. With all I got up to with Christofer, you'd think I would have been terrified."

"It's not the worst thing, being scared," Levi tells him. "Just means you want to keep living."

"I think I'd given up on that thought," Farlan confesses. "Since what happened with those soldiers by the river I feel as though I've been living just for that day when this all finally ends, only I never thought it could end any other way than by..."

"It doesn't have to come to that," Levi speaks out as Farlan's words trail off. "We're so close to the end of all of this now. In less than a year we could all be back home."

“Home,” Farlan repeats, like he’s never heard the word before. “Do you really think you can go back, after all of this? Do you think you can go back to who you were before? To keep living next to those people, knowing they made all of this possible?”

Levi considers the words for a moment and shrugs. “What else is there?” he finally asks. “My life has never been like yours, Farlan. I’ve never been able to just leave. And even if I could, where would I go? Where could either one of us go where they don’t hate us as much as they do here?”

Farlan seems to consider the words for a moment, a look on his face like he’s upset with himself for having forgotten. In the end he simply shrugs and says, “Well, we always get by, don’t we, people like us?”

Levi agrees in a grunt. “Keep quiet about it, never tell anyone your real name, take a wife so no one will suspect anything,” he lists and Farlan utters a laugh.

“Well, two out of three might do for me,” he says. “I can’t imagine getting married. I mean, what if she bakes a better gugelhupf than I do?”

Levi chuckles quietly. “I’m sure that would be the worst of your problems,” he voices, and Farlan smothers another laugh with the palm of his hand.

“Did you ever...” Farlan starts, making an incomprehensible gesture with his hands before finishing, “with a woman?”

Levi frowns at the memory and scoffs. “Just the once,” he says. “You?”

Farlan hurries to shake his head. “Me? No, only with Christofer. We were still quite young when we met, you know, so I would hardly have had the chance.”

Levi grunts in acknowledgement before thinking to say, “You never really told me how you two met.”

“We were in the same kameradschaft of the Hitlerjugend,” Farlan explains quietly. “He was the star, of course, he was good at everything that mattered most to the leaders, and he was the fastest runner of everyone in our gefolgschaft. The one thing he could not learn to save his life, though, was the Morse code. I helped him with that.”

“What was it like?”

Farlan scoffs. “Absolute hell,” he states. “I hated every second of it, but being able to see Christofer made it bearable, even if he oftentimes pretended not to know me – I wasn’t very popular, you see, and he had a reputation to maintain.”

“I guess I should be glad I dodged that bullet,” Levi thinks aloud and Farlan agrees in a hum.

“Someone small and funny looking like you?” he says, letting out a quiet laugh. “They would have torn you to shreds in a day. How I made it through two years of that is beyond me.”

“Why did you?” Levi asks now, and Farlan scoffs again.

“Are you joking?” he asks Levi back. “They didn’t exactly make it easy for you *not* to join. All the other boys in my class were members and they bullied me mercilessly about not having signed up, and that was just the tip of the iceberg. My teachers questioned me about it at every turn, they graded me down on all of my work because of it... Finally I realised I’d never get into university if I didn’t join, so I forced myself to put up with it.”

“What did you parents think about all that?”

“They didn’t like it one bit,” Farlan tells in a whisper. “Everyone at the Jugend hated religion, and going on marches meant I couldn’t attend mass on Sundays. They really do everything in their power to drive all of that out of you – I guess they felt we were only supposed to have one God, and that ought to be the Führer.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “Hard to picture you going on marches,” he admits, making Farlan chuckle quietly.

“I was rubbish at just about everything they made us do,” he says. “All forms of physical activity were the main thing, as was mindlessly repeating Nazi dogma. I used to tell Christofer even a monkey could be taught to be good at that nonsense and he got so angry with me. He always took it very seriously – I think it was the only thing he had ever really been good at.”

“I suppose that was the good that came out of it,” Levi muses. “I mean, you wouldn’t have met him if you hadn’t joined.”

Farlan agrees. “Though I have to admit he was more than a little infuriating at times. He was a year younger than me, you know, and he could be so immature. His father was a party member, so they had started drilling all of those good values into him from when he was just a little boy, and we never learned to see eye to eye on most of it since he never really learned to question it later on.”

“Maybe it was easier for him not to,” Levi thinks aloud and Farlan sighs.

“He wasn’t a bad person,” he goes on. “He just never learned to *think* about things. He kept telling me to see the bigger picture – that in the long run what the Nazis were doing would be good for most if not all of us. The economy going sour hit his family harder than most, so he had learned all that bitterness from home as well.”

Levi sneers, thinking about his mother. “It sounds to me like you’re making excuses.”

Farlan shrugs. “I suppose I am,” he admits. “Sometimes I don’t know why I love him as much as I do. He could be such a hypocrite at times, especially when it came to people like us. I remember talking with him about the closing down of the bars and clubs and such, and him saying it was a good thing, and that people who visit places like that are nothing but dirty perverts anyway who deserve to be sent to prison.”

Levi stays quiet; it seems wrong to tell Farlan that to him Christofer sounds like a sanctimonious little shit, and the worst sort of Nazi to boot.

“He must sound so terrible to you,” Farlan says himself, laughing a little, “but he had his good sides. Most of the time I could see right through all of those opinions he had, how they were more stubbornness than anything else. He was terrified of his father; he’d been raised to respect him to such a degree that he could never have admitted he was wrong about anything. I felt sorry for him about that more often than once, especially because underneath all of that he was such a gentle person, quite artistic even. That was a side of himself he could only ever show to me.”

“Sounds complicated,” Levi mutters and Farlan laughs again.

“That’s a bit rich, coming from you,” he notes, stopping to rub at his eyes and yawn. “Considering who you’re with.”

Levi scoffs. “I suppose,” he admits, catching Farlan’s yawn, “though it’s not like that with me and Erwin. We’re not like you and Christofer.”

“What are you like then?”

Levi pauses to consider the question. “I don’t really know,” he finally says. “I guess it’s convenient.”

“That sounds like such a terrible way to put it,” Farlan argues, frowning. “You know he really cares about you. Doesn’t that matter to you at—”

“Of course it does,” Levi interrupts the other man impatiently. “And it’s not as if I don’t. But you said it yourself, there are limits to what this can be, and you know I don’t really believe in... Things like what you and Christofer had. Is it any wonder I don’t know what to call it?”

Farlan lets out a hiss of a sigh. “Perhaps it would suit you both better not to call it anything at all,” he says. “You’re both adults. I suppose you can both be expected to understand what it is you have without naming it this way or that.”

Levi agrees quietly, thinking about all the words he knows for this sort of thing: an affair, a romance; lovers, companions. Nothing describes what he has with Erwin, and Levi feels nothing ever could, at least nothing he can find in his limited supply of words and expressions.

“I sometimes wonder if you realise how lucky you are to have found Erwin,” Farlan whispers, staring up at the ceiling instead of looking at Levi.

“He’s done a lot for us,” he agrees in a mumble. “I’m not sure where we’d be without his help.”

“Well, yes, of course there’s that,” Farlan says and sighs again. “But what I meant was... Well, he *is* terribly handsome.”

Levi turns to look at Farlan, frowning and uttering a quiet laugh. “You really think I care about that?” he asks, making the other man sneer.

“Oh, stop acting like you’re better than the rest of us, Levi,” Farlan goes on, making Levi laugh again. “You do care about that. Everybody does.”

“So you think I stumbled upon a Nazi officer and instantly thought, ‘Oh, but isn’t he handsome’?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying,” Farlan corrects him almost snappishly. “All I’m saying is that you sure as hell don’t mind it now that you’re having—”

“He’s a good person,” Levi says. “*That’s* what I like about him.”

Farlan turns to look at him in silence for a few seconds before letting his gaze fall back onto the ceiling. “If you want to keep insisting that, be my guest,” he mutters, closing his eyes, “but if I were in your shoes I wouldn’t shy away from admitting I like the way he looks – or that I like his age.”

“What does his age have to do with anything?” Levi asks, frowning.

“Well, you know I loved Christofer,” Farlan starts explaining, “but as I said, he’s a year younger than I am, and sometimes he was very childish. All I’m saying is that had I not fallen for Christofer I might have preferred someone... older than myself.”

“What the fuck for?” Levi asks, feeling the explanation has only managed to make him more confused.

“Oh, come on,” Farlan huffs, sounding almost irritated. “An older gentleman with money and experience, someone who can take care of you and give you some of those things you couldn’t normally have at your age.”

“You think that’s how I see Erwin?” Levi whispers, not sure whether he should laugh or cry as Farlan shrugs.

“Well, isn’t that what he is?”

“No, it isn’t,” Levi argues. “He’s not in a position to help me because of how much older he is. He’s in a position to help me because of how much less of a Jew he is.”

Levi can just see Farlan flinching at the word before he opens his mouth. “Well, all I’m saying is that I wouldn’t mind it,” he expresses, sounding suddenly proud. “It seems to me like you don’t like it when someone points out he’s older than you.”

“I just never even thought about it,” Levi tries to explain. “I never thought for a second we would... That it would come to this, and his age has nothing to do with how things turned out.”

Farlan lets out another heavy sigh and glances at Levi. “I suppose our minds just work very differently,” he concedes before turning onto his side and falling asleep.

Levi stays in the bed for a while and listens to Farlan’s breathing as it grows deeper, thinking about the words they’ve just exchanged. Of course he realised Erwin was older – he noticed it

the moment they met – but who's Farlan to say it has to mean something, and that it has to mean something like *that*? Levi thinks back to those days in Berlin, tries to picture the faces of the men he knew then, tries to estimate their ages, but fails with all save for one, the man who helped him with his false papers. He was married, had a few children as well as far as Levi knew, and now that he thinks about it he must have been roughly Erwin's age. He spends another moment idly wondering whether there's something within him that seeks out men like that before he sneers aloud to himself and gets out of the bed, realising it hardly matters one way or the other. Besides, Levi thinks to himself as he starts quietly dusting the bookshelf, he has never volunteered to ask anyone for anything, always preferring to take care of his own business. Suddenly it seems strange to Levi that he should have thought of Farlan as any sort of authority when it comes to what he does and with whom and for what reasons.

By the time Erwin returns, Farlan has gone back to reading while Levi scrubs at the grease stains on the oven door, getting up from his knees as he hears the door opening and closing in the hallway and greeting Erwin with a quiet nod as he walks into the kitchen, laying the usual brown paper bag on the counter. The man sits down heavily at the table, lighting a cigarette the smell of which draws Farlan into the room as well; the two smoke quietly while Levi keeps his distance, watching as Erwin tears open the envelope and reads the short note within.

"It's Marie," he tells Levi in a whisper. "She had her baby two days ago. A girl."

"So everything went well?" Levi asks, walking closer to peer down at the note as Erwin nods.

"Both mother and child are in excellent health," he replies, flashing a smile that falters sooner than Levi expected. "I brought some things to make dinner with. You should feel free to help yourselves."

"Aren't you going to eat?" Levi asks Erwin, frowning as the man shakes his head.

"I haven't much of an appetite," he replies, sounding a touch apologetic as he catches Levi's unimpressed expression. "I had a heavy lunch."

Farlan breathes out a cloud of smoke, plunging his hands into the bag and pulling out a fillet of fish wrapped in a few folds' worth of an old newspaper. He passes it to Levi without a word, taking a deep drag off his cigarette and breathing out again.

"Jesus help me," he mutters at no one in particular it seems. "For a few of these a day I'd happily convert."

"To what?" Erwin asks him, a hint of amusement in his tone as Farlan inhales more smoke.

"Anything," the man whispers, making Erwin laugh quietly before getting up from his seat and walking over to the pantry and picking a shoebox off the top shelf.

"Have a few," he tells Farlan, lifting the lid off the box to reveal a neat row of cigarette packs; two dozen, Levi estimates quickly as he rummages through the paper bag and pulls out a tin of beans.

“Oh, Erwin,” Farlan whispers and sighs. “You truly are a lifesaver.”

“They’re good for the nerves,” Erwin replies, choosing five packs out of the bunch and handing them to Farlan.

“They’ll be bad for our linens,” Levi mutters. “I’ll never get the stench out if you smoke indoors.”

“I’ll stay by the window,” Farlan promises, thanking Erwin as he fights to fit all of the packs into the pockets of his trousers.

By the time they’ve made it back to the apartment later that evening Farlan looks to be in desperate need of a smoke; his face has grown pale, and Levi didn’t miss his constant restless fidgeting as they walked through the city, doing their best to avoid any men who crossed their path, uniform or no. When they finally reach their bedroom, Farlan leans quickly out of the open window and lights a cigarette, his hands shaking so badly he barely manages the task.

“I don’t know how much more of this I can take,” he admits to Levi in a whisper that Levi can barely hear over his bursts of faux coughing. “I know you said this could be over in a year, but suddenly it sounds like such a long time.”

Levi nods mutely and watches the shape of Farlan’s body sketched against the dark night sky; he thinks about Erwin and wonders what the man is doing, whether he’s at home smoking out of his bedroom window or whether he’s out in the city somewhere, carrying out missions he doesn’t deem worthy of mentioning to Levi, or meeting people he’s never told Levi about.

“Try not to think too far ahead,” Levi reminds Farlan absently. “We made it through another day.”

The man nods, and when he curls up next to Levi that night, the smell of cigarettes makes Levi think of Erwin again so that by the time he heads out the following day, a dull kind of longing has built into an ache in his chest. He wonders whether there will be time this evening for them to climb under the covers, to explore new ways of getting close, or whether they could sit down over a cup of tea and talk; Levi could ask Erwin about the weekend, and they could talk openly now that Farlan won’t be there. As he walks up the steps, Levi feels the cold has settled into his bones and knocking on Erwin’s door he dreams of a hot bath; the tub would be a tight fit for the both of them, but Levi thinks they could manage it, until the expression on Erwin’s face makes him forget all about it.

“I have company,” the man whispers as Levi shrugs out of his coat, and the look on his face makes Levi grow alarmed.

“Trouble?” he mutters under his breath, catching Erwin shaking his head.

“Just a word of warning,” he explains, walking ahead of Levi into the sitting room, where the sight of Osterhaus lounging in Erwin’s chair makes Levi shudder with anger.

“Ah, your free labour is here,” the man drawls lazily when he sees Levi, his wide mouth pulling into a smug smile. “Your operation here lacks the sheer size of what IG Farben has going on in Poland, but the principle is the same, I assume.”

Erwin doesn't speak, perhaps thinking it unnecessary to dignify the statement with an answer; he crosses the room steadily and sits down on the sofa. Levi lingers by the double doors for a moment and wonders whether he ought to get to work, but the sight of Erwin in his plain shirt and slacks opposite of Osterhaus in his uniform makes him follow the man onto the sofa, though he leaves a good metre between them as he takes a seat.

“And I assume you're again planning to overstay your welcome,” Erwin says calmly, throwing one of his legs over the other and folding his hands neatly in his lap.

“After everything I've done for you, you really ought to rethink what that means,” the old man responds. “I should be able to move in without so much as a word from you against it.”

“I'm sorry,” Erwin speaks; the apology makes the hairs at the back of Levi's head stand on end. “Perhaps I wasn't being clear about how utterly repulsive I find your presence. Rest assured, there are few things which disgust me as much.”

Osterhaus lets out a wheezing laugh that leaves a smear of spittle onto his purplish bottom lip. “You forget I've seen your record,” the man goes on, “so we both know that's not true. That little trip you took back in '42 must have seen to that. Tell me, did they show you the latrines?”

Erwin stays quiet again and Levi can't help looking at him, wondering why he doesn't respond, why he doesn't tell Osterhaus to shut his disgusting piece of shit mouth and throw him out of the apartment.

“Though I guess there are things you would have found more distasteful than that,” Osterhaus muses and sighs. “Mark my words, people are going to curse you one day for those improvements you made in the filing system.”

“I certainly hope so,” Erwin responds, “and I hope they will help many people find answers to the pressing questions that will no doubt rise after this is over.”

“I've followed your work at the Personalhauptamt – from a distance, of course,” Osterhaus says now. “You're really quite good at what you do and you've certainly helped make all of this run as smoothly as it has.”

Though Levi watches Erwin closely he can't see any shift in his expression, not even a hint of pain or anger or regret. “It would truly be a pleasure to tell you of the other things I've accomplished,” he merely says, “but I'm afraid that information is only released on a need-to-know basis. I'm sure you understand.”

Osterhaus sneers, the corners of his bruise-coloured mouth pulling down from the complacent smile. “Yes, you've kept busy I hear,” he says, glancing at Levi in passing. “In case you were still wondering whether you managed to fool Wolfgang into thinking you weren't fucking his wife behind his back, the answer is you didn't.”

“I had gathered as much,” Erwin responds as calmly as before, though Levi can see the expression on his face stiffening slightly. “I was interviewed briefly about the matter shortly after his arrest.”

“It’s a devilishly tricky situation for Lilian,” the old man goes on. “You could hardly have made things more difficult for her. Did you know she’s been trying to sell off her jewellery? Some of those skimpy frocks too if I understand right.”

“Has she now?”

“Well, we both know what will come next,” Osterhaus continues, shifting in his seat, “though I don’t know who would pay for something they’ve already had for free.”

Levi watches as Erwin’s hands clench into fists in his lap and judging by the bark of laughter he lets out Osterhaus has seen it too.

“Don’t tell me you actually fell for the bitch,” he says, tutting quietly. “Was it the desperation that made you lose interest? Personally I like the flavour it adds to the fucking – makes them so reluctant to say no to anything.”

Levi shudders but he can’t tell which is more the cause, Osterhaus’ words or the cold, calculated rage on Erwin’s features. He’s not seen the man like this; it makes Levi think back to that night when he watched Erwin slash open a man’s throat, and suddenly the viciousness of that one movement, as deadly as it was, seems like a caress compared to what the man seems capable of now.

“Of course she has more pride than most,” Osterhaus says. “It’s always the upstarts who are the worst, but then, I suppose they already know what it’s like to be at the bottom. Or she at least does – quite literally.”

“If there was nothing else you–”

“You see, I’ve always hated hypocrites,” Osterhaus interrupts Erwin, his expression growing suddenly angry, “and I can already see how the winning of this war will turn you all into the worst kind of hypocrites. The British, the Americans...” His words trail off and he spits on the rug; Levi looks at the blob of phlegm in absolute disgust. “How many civilians have died in Berlin so far? How many in Hamburg, Munich, in Frankfurt? How many more will die by your hands before this is all over? And isn’t it funny how none of those bombs have landed anywhere near the tracks heading east?”

“Considering you’re the ones who built those tracks I hardly think you’re in a position to judge,” Erwin counters in a voice so cold it makes Levi shudder. “If you want to start talking numbers we both know we’ll be here all night.”

“Don’t pretend any of you give a shit about those people,” Osterhaus hisses. “What was your response when they were pouring out of the Reich? Or is the air so thin up on your high horse that you’ve forgotten?”

“How could we have known what you had in store for them?” Erwin says, his voice suddenly showing pain and a kind of desperation Levi hasn’t heard in it before. “How could we have foreseen such evil? How could anyone predict something so heinous, a blind madness such as this?”

Osterhaus sneers, turning his eyes on Levi and squinting maliciously. “And what does the rat think of all of this?” he asks, the lazy drawl back in his voice. “I suppose you think they can do no wrong, do you?”

Levi clicks his tongue, glancing quickly at Erwin. “My thinking is that most people are selfish bastards who wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire, and that has nothing to do with where you’re from. But you lot...” he says, his voice lowering to something resembling a growl despite him trying to stay calm. “There aren’t words ugly enough for what you are.”

The old man looks at him in silence for a few seconds and Levi meets his dirty grey eyes without flinching, picturing a bleeding hole between them, very neat and precise, before Erwin draws the man’s attention again.

“And thus you have accomplished what you came here to do,” he says, and Levi is relieved to see the usual composure. “You have grossly overstayed your welcome.”

Osterhaus stretches out his legs before getting out of the chair arduously, looking down at Erwin as he buttons up the jacket of his uniform. “January 1st,” the old man says, something spiteful behind those two words, though Levi can’t understand why. “We’ll see how smug you are then.”

The second he hears the sound of the door closing, Levi jumps up and rushes into the bathroom, dousing a rag in hot water and returning to rub at the spittle on the rug. He keeps glancing at Erwin while he works; the man has remained on the sofa, eyes distant as he smokes, lighting another cigarette as soon as he has finished the first. Levi can feel his own brows knitting on his forehead as he follows Erwin, taking in the slouching posture and the exhausted expression.

“Erwin?” he calls out quietly, repeating the name when it doesn’t catch the man’s attention. “What happens in January?”

Erwin presses the heel of his left hand against his eye for a moment before straightening his pose and saying, “It’s when I leave Dresden.”

Levi feels the words as an instant dread in his chest that makes a cold sweat start gathering in his hairline. “Where will you go?” he asks in a hollow whisper, trying to catch Erwin’s expression through the cloud of smoke he exhales.

“I’m not sure,” he says in that same emotionless tone as before. “The eastern front, most likely.”

Levi turns his eyes back on the rug and thinks of all the questions he doesn’t need to ask: why do you have to go? why don’t you just leave? will it be dangerous? will you come back? His

hands forget their task as they hold on to the wet rag like hoping the coarse fabric will steady him somehow.

“Levi?”

“Is that what he came here to say?” Levi rushes to ask; the worry in Erwin’s voice makes him feel selfish.

“That,” Erwin says, pausing to take a drag out of his cigarette, “and to tell me our little venture is approaching its end. There’ll be one more family I am to help before he makes his own exit.”

“Well that’s good, isn’t it?” Levi asks. “You’ll be done with all of this then.”

Erwin nods absently and Levi wonders whether the comfort feels too small for now, or whether there’s something he doesn’t know that’s making it seem inconsequential to Erwin.

“He’ll be leaving after Christmas.”

So that’s it then – a few miserable days are all Erwin will get after enduring this shit for months. Levi drops the drenched cloth onto the floor and gets to his feet, crossing the room to Erwin and walking around the sofa to lean onto the backrest, his arms coming to lie on Erwin’s chest.

“At least now we know,” the man whispers, his head falling against Levi’s shoulder as he pinches the bridge of his nose.

“Know what?”

“When you’ll need to go into hiding,” Erwin says, glancing at Levi as he groans. “You know you’ll have to do it, Levi.”

“I know,” he replies wearily. “I promised you, didn’t I? So I’ll do it – even if I lose my fucking mind because of it.”

Erwin lets out a miniscule laugh. “Thank you, Levi,” he says softly, bringing his hand to squeeze Levi’s fingers for a moment. “It’ll make my leaving bearable, knowing you’ll be safer here.”

Levi grabs Erwin’s hand again as it starts to fall back onto his lap, suddenly craving the simple warmth of that touch as he presses the side of his face against Erwin’s neck, breathing in that scent of soap and cigarettes. “I’ll start preparing for it,” he tells the man quietly, taking pleasure in the smoothness of Erwin’s hand against his until running his thumb over the man’s knuckles reveals a score of nicks and cuts.

“You shouldn’t worry about that,” Erwin tells him, putting out his cigarette and closing his eyes as he lets his head fall more heavily against Levi. “There was a mission. We ran into some trouble.”

“There was a mission?”

“Very short notice,” Erwin hurries to explain, probably hearing the hint of irritation in Levi’s tone. “There wasn’t time to contact you.”

“Are there many of those missions when you don’t have time to contact me?” Levi asks the man, who smiles warmly.

“Some,” he responds. “Not many. You wouldn’t happen to be concerned about my wellbeing, would you, Levi?”

Levi clicks his tongue. “What kind of a stupid question is that?” he asks back, making Erwin chuckle. “I thought you were supposed to be smart.”

“We all have our blind spots,” Erwin says, turning to glance at Levi again, “and it seems you are mine.”

Levi can feel a troubling heat spreading onto his cheeks and he shifts his weight restlessly on his legs before leaning his chin more firmly against Erwin’s shoulder. Not knowing what to say, he settles for the first thing that comes to his mind.

“You’ve been smoking a lot more lately,” he states quietly.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin whispers. “I know you dislike the habit.”

“My uncle used to smoke,” Levi explains, “and it made him cough something awful, like his lungs were full of shit. I don’t think it’s good for you. In a few years you’ll sound like a sixty-year-old.”

Erwin laughs again. “Hearing how much you care almost makes it worth it.”

Levi clicks his tongue another time. “You’re being stupid again,” he scolds the man, who reaches his hand up and into Levi’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats quietly. “I promise to take better care of myself in the future. I’ll even have Doctor Jäger make sure my lungs are still working like a thirty-four-year-old’s.”

“You found him?” Levi asks and Erwin nods.

“He has returned to Dresden,” the man explains. “I’ve already contacted him regarding Isabel and he says he can help, though I’m afraid it won’t be cheap.”

“Never mind the cost,” Levi says, “as long as I don’t need to see her in so much pain anymore.”

Erwin nods. “He won’t be staying long, so it’ll be best that he visits you at your earliest convenience.”

“You know when I’m free as well as I do,” Levi notes, and the man nods again.

“I’ll let you know on Thursday,” Erwin promises, letting go of Levi’s hand and getting to his feet. “You should feel free to prepare some dinner for yourself, if you’d like to eat here

before you go.”

“Will you have some?” Levi asks him, frowning as Erwin shakes his head.

“I haven’t much of an appetite lately,” he explains, sounding apologetic as he sits down at the secretaire and lights another cigarette. “I’m sorry. I’m afraid I have to get to work.”

“I guess I should too,” Levi mutters at Erwin’s back, still gathering himself from how quickly Erwin withdrew from him, suddenly knowing he won’t be staying the night this time.

Levi takes his leave after he’s finished with the laundry, taking the intended dinner with him and giving it to Farlan and Isabel who wolf it down while Levi pushes his own food around the plate unenthusiastically, thinking about Erwin alone in his apartment, or going about all that business for Osterhaus he won’t tell Levi about. He remembers that strained expression on the man’s face when he asked him about the weekend; and no wonder he looked so uneasy, having carried out a mission on top of everything else he has on his plate.

“January 1st,” Levi suddenly says, interrupting Farlan and Isabel’s bickering. “That’s when Erwin leaves Dresden, and when we’ll have to go as well.”

Farlan looks up from the half a sausage on his plate. “So late?” he asks. “Wouldn’t it be wiser to—”

“January 1st,” Levi repeats. “That’s when we’ll leave. It’s best to tell the neighbours that we’re sending Isabel to the country, to stay with your imaginary aunt. That way no one will think much of it when we walk out of here with a bunch of suitcases.”

Isabel and Farlan stare at him from across the table for a few seconds before turning wordlessly back to their plates, and Levi isn’t sure whether he’s relieved they’re not making a problem out of it or whether he should feel alarmed at how much like Kenny he just sounded. He tries to think forward to the moment the door of the apartment closes behind them and all that’s left is the idleness and silence, but something in his mind is resisting the idea even now. He lets his thoughts travel further until they cross something even more painful than the thought of being locked up; Erwin leaving. The image makes Levi push his plate aside and leave the kitchen, though once he sits down in the dimly lit bedroom, he doesn’t understand why he thought it wouldn’t follow him there.

The doctor pays them a visit the following week; he’s a wiry man in his forties with a thin moustache, round glasses and a serious expression which eases but a little when he greets Isabel and shakes her hand. She drives Levi and Farlan out of the room while she talks to Doctor Jäger, and by the time they return she has pulled their savings out of the cupboard and paid for the medicine which Levi sees her hide in the shoebox with her U-Boat collection.

“Is there something wrong with your health?” Doctor Jäger asks Levi, frowning at his coughing.

“It’s what I’d like them to think,” Levi explains, nodding toward the stairwell; the doctor seems to understand.

“I’d imagine it’s quite a nuisance.”

“You have no idea,” Farlan joins in from the table, shrugging at Levi’s glare dismissively.

“Well,” the doctor adds, “I’d suggest tea with honey for the sore throat it’ll give you. Oh, and Erwin asked me to assure you that there is nothing wrong with his lungs either.”

Levi clicks his tongue but thanks the man for the news as well when he takes his leave; he can see Frau Niemeyer stopping him on the street outside the building, and it only takes her until the next air raid to bring up the matter.

“Said he was here to listen to your lungs,” she tells Levi as they all huddle together and wait for the bombs. “Home visits must be costly – not that it’s any of my business, of course.”

“He knows Herr Sturmbannführer,” Levi explains in short, “who was kind enough to pay for the visit.”

“Did he indeed?” Frau Niemeyer says, sounding surprised. “That really is very kind of him. And I suppose it eases some people’s...”

“Some people’s what?” Levi asks as her words trail off, but the old woman shakes her head almost irritably.

“Oh, never you mind that,” she tells him, sighing heavily as the sirens start blaring, exposing this as another false alarm. “You know, when I was your age I never thought I’d one day have to drag my achy bones into a basement several times a week for absolutely no blasted reason.”

Levi utters a quiet laugh between loud coughs, though his mind is still busily decoding Frau Niemeyer’s previous comment. It seems reasonable to assume she was talking about Böhmer, whom Levi has noticed casting sour glances at their bedroom window from time to time. He thinks about what Farlan said about it being wiser to go into hiding earlier, and weighs his options one more time before deciding once again to stick to the original plan. After all, with the air raids growing ever more frequent, who says Erwin’s apartment is the safest place? Should the bombs really start falling, there will be no cellar for them to run to for sanctuary.

Another week passes, the days Levi and Farlan spend at Erwin’s grow into a routine for Levi while making the other man increasingly anxious; more than once Levi catches him pretending to read rather than actually taking in the words on the pages. Their conversations grow sparse and the silence grows heavy until in Levi’s mind it starts to have a presence of its own, like it’s a score of restless spirits that wander through the apartment. Erwin is also often late in returning, always refusing dinner and smelling like cigarettes, though once or twice Levi thinks he can also detect the faintest scent of chlorine. When Farlan is there they never talk much and Levi never stays the night, even when stepping out into the bitter cold makes Levi ache for Erwin’s arms around him, their legs entangled under the covers as he kisses Erwin’s forehead, and his nose, and his lips.

On the last day of November Levi heads out from his apartment again, leaving behind a drug-groggy Isabel and Farlan who has resumed his previous habit of writing letters; Levi's seen the high stack of envelopes he keeps in the desk drawer, each one closed and addressed to Christofer, but Levi has never heard Farlan speak of buying stamps. Perhaps he knows even better than Levi does that those letters can never leave the apartment. In the gloomy atmosphere that has taken over since the news of Erwin's departure, those letters serve as a reminder to Levi of the one thing that he regards as a constant bit of good news; it's been two weeks since he's had any word from Krieger and every new day that doesn't bring forth a letter from the man makes Levi more hopeful that he has met his inevitable demise by the hands of some nameless Red Army soldier. Levi likes to picture it; a Russian sharpshooter hiding by the banks of a river, aiming his gun at Krieger who doesn't expect it, being in the middle of taking a piss when the bullet rips through his head from behind and he falls face first in a puddle of his own urine. The image makes Levi almost chuckle quietly as he skips up the steps to Erwin's apartment, until the silence he meets at the door drives the thought from his mind.

Levi knocks again and reminds himself of what the time was when he left, knowing he is not too late or too early. Perhaps Erwin is off on another short-notice mission, or wherever he goes to get that hint of chlorine onto his hair. Levi turns the key to the apartment around in his pocket, his heart hammering in his chest despite the attempted reasoning and with every second that passes Levi becomes more aware of the alternative: Erwin in an interrogation room, holding on to Holtz through hours and days of torture; Erwin in a Gestapo cell, waiting for his turn in front of a firing squad; Erwin lying dead in his apartment with a bloody gash across his throat. With sudden determination Levi pulls out the key and fits it into the lock, turning it slowly and sneaking in through the gap, closing the door behind himself as soundlessly as he can.

"Erwin?" he calls out in a half-whisper, squinting through the darkness of the entrance hall at the glimmer of light pouring in through the closed double doors of the sitting room; he can make out the shape of something on the floor, something white, like a sheet of paper. "Fuck. Erwin?"

There's no answer and Levi can't tell whether the sound he thinks he hears is that of quiet conversation or of his heart tearing a hole in his ribcage. He considers passing through the bathroom and grabbing Erwin's razor from its place in the drawer of the washstand, but a shadow passing over the pool of light on the floor makes him change his mind. He walks toward the doors, heavy boots falling suddenly as softly as bare feet on the floor as he pads closer, peering through the painted glass for a few seconds before twisting his fingers around the handle and stepping in.

The floor is littered with papers; brown paper files and manila envelopes lie scattered on the furniture with torn documents filled from top to bottom with Erwin's handwriting. There are shards by the coffee table – someone has broken a glass – and a pool of something red has soaked into the fibres of the rug. Erwin is sitting on the sofa in his uniform, the lit cigarette between his lips drawing deep shadows across his face; the only source of light besides the small lamp sitting atop the secretaire. Levi follows its glow with his eyes, follows the trail of

papers and secrets over to the chair in which Lilian sits, dishevelled but calm and – it suddenly occurs to Levi – more dangerous than any officer of the Gestapo. She meets Levi's gaze and they both stop to stare, her eyes narrowing as her mouth twists in an ugly smile.

"Just the help," she whispers; the resentment in her voice makes Levi shudder.

Erwin doesn't reply; Levi turns to look at him, taking in the indifference of his expression, the line of a scratch across his cheek, the right hand he has placed in his pocket. "Levi," he suddenly says so softly it seems to make Lilian flinch. "There is some laundry in the bedroom. Please see to it now."

But Lilian's stare seems to have frozen Levi in place; he looks at her again, takes in the smudged mascara that has run in streaks down her face, the ruffled hair, the broken heel of her left shoe as well as the faint red welts around her wrists.

"Levi—" Erwin starts again, but Lilian cuts him off.

"You're disgusting," she tells Levi, her face full of hate as she turns to Erwin. "It's revolting. Don't you see how revolting you are?"

Levi watches as Erwin meets her eyes but doesn't speak, doesn't defend himself, doesn't defend him. The corners of her mouth sink and she seems to shudder.

"How dare you?" she asks Erwin now. "How *dare* you taint me with that? How dare you get close to *me* after... mating with him like a pair of some repulsive—"

"You shut your mouth," Levi hears himself growl. "This is the only warning you'll get. You keep your mouth shut about Erwin or I'll—"

"Levi," Erwin calls out again, more loudly than last time. "The laundry. Please."

Lilian lets out a snort of laughter. "At least he never made me his slave," she tells Levi viciously. "Though for someone like you this hovel probably seems like a palace, and the only way you'll get anywhere near a place like this is by cleaning it."

Levi can feel his hands clenching into fists in his pockets as he meets that poisonous glare, but Erwin's words weigh in his mind more heavily than hers. Why the laundry? Why now? Unless...

"That's enough, Lilian," Erwin says, putting out his cigarette and getting to his feet. "You've made your insults. It's high time we resolved this."

"Yes," she agrees, taking a deep breath and throwing her hair over her shoulder, "and I think I know exactly how."

Levi watches her picking up the nearest folder and riffling through it before she places it on top of a stack of papers; to his left he can hear Erwin exhaling sharply.

"Lilian," he says, quietly and patiently, like he's talking to someone holding a gun to their head. "Don't do this. You have a—"

“I know some people who would find all of this very interesting,” she muses quietly. “I have to admit my English is a little rusty, but I’m sure there are others who could make better sense of this.”

“Lilian,” Erwin repeats in that same calm tone of voice, and Levi can’t understand how he manages it as he watches the woman peering down at the pages in front of her. “You really shouldn’t–”

“Never presume to tell me what to do, Erwin,” she tells him in a dangerously low voice. “Don’t ever presume to give me advice.”

“I know you understood it when I told you,” Erwin goes on, his hand still in his pocket. “I know you trust Wolfgang, and you know he’s right about the war.”

To Levi Lilian’s expression looks as stony as ever, but to Erwin it seems to reveal something that prompts him to continue.

“Take the children and run, Lilian,” he says, that note of desperation suddenly back in his voice. “I know better than to wish to make up for all the ways in which I have wronged you but please, let me help you in this. Let me help you keep your family safe.”

“You want me to flee,” she says. “Like a coward.”

“Look around you, Lilian,” Erwin tries again. “There’s nothing left for you here, no friends you can count on. What are you going to do when the Red Army reaches the city? You know as well as– You know better than I what those men will do. Do you think your daughter is young enough to escape that?”

This time even Levi sees it, the moment of doubt that passes across her features as she turns to look at the sheets of paper on the secretaire.

“You have three tickets to Geneva,” Erwin says. “My man will meet you all there and get you safely to the ocean. Two weeks from now you’ll be on board a ship. You can start a new life–”

“With no husband and no money,” she tells him. “How well do you think I’ll manage?”

“Your chances are far better there,” Erwin tries to explain. “After all this is over Germany won’t be much more than a pile of rubble. Who do you think is going to pay for this war – just like the last one?”

“How do you expect me to leave Wolfgang?” Lilian says, suddenly wiping at the corner of her eye. “Sitting all alone in a prison somewhere, missing me and the–”

“He would want you to be safe,” Erwin interrupts her. “It’s the only reason he told Osterhaus to go ahead with the plan. He wants you safe more than anything, and he knows this is the best way to achieve that goal.”

“You don’t even sound like yourself,” she mutters, wiping her nose on her wrist. “How do you expect me to trust you with my life? With the lives of my children?”

“I don’t expect that,” Erwin tells her, drawing a deep breath, “but please, trust Wolfgang. He’s never wanted anything but the best for you, you know that.”

“You shouldn’t talk about my husband,” she says, but the hatred from before has burned from her voice.

“Please,” Erwin says again. “Let me help you, Lilian. I know you have no reason to trust me but I wish you to understand that I never meant to hurt you like this.”

Lilian sneers quietly and glances quickly at Levi before standing up, unsteady on her broken heel. Levi watches warily as she crosses the room to Erwin on tiptoes, stopping to stand in front of him and hitting him hard across the face with the back of her hand. When he sees Levi stepping forward Erwin shakes his head, facing Lilian as calmly as before despite the drops of blood gathering in the corner of his mouth.

“Don’t you ever talk to me about the ways in which you’ve hurt me,” she tells him in a whisper before turning away and wiping at the smudges of makeup on her face. They watch her in silence as she gathers her things and riffles through the files on the secretaire one more time before leaving them where they are and walking out of the room.

The slamming of the door leaves them standing still, paralysed for an instant before Erwin lights a cigarette, smoking on it jerkily as his right hand disappears into his pocket again. Levi watches him carefully from the corner of his eye, frowning at the severity of his expression as he looks at the papers on the floor, kicking at them so suddenly it makes Levi flinch and step back. He watches as Erwin struggles to keep his balance, his boot falling heavily on the shards of glass on the rug; it leaves red smears on the pages as he regains his posture.

“You should go,” Erwin tells him; to Levi his words are as aggressive as his actions.

Levi doesn’t speak, ignoring the man’s command and taking a step forward. He kneels down on the floor and starts gathering up the papers, piling up the torn and crumpled pages as best he can.

“Stop that,” Erwin orders, his voice suddenly that of an officer. “Didn’t you hear me?”

Levi can feel Erwin staring down at him as he keeps his hands steady in their task, pulling files out from under the furniture, eyes barely seeing the writing as he stacks the sheets together, lifting them on the coffee table from where Erwin grabs them, throwing them across the room to land in haphazard piles in the corner.

“I told you to stop that, Levi,” he says, raising his voice. “I told you to stop and leave. Why won’t you just go?”

Levi lifts his eyes to meet Erwin’s, not knowing whether his expression shows more defiance or concern as he stares back at the man, his brows drawing to a deep frown at the sight of Erwin’s features, the desperation, the distress. He crouches down, taking Levi by surprise and making him pull back as he starts clutching the papers on the floor, flinging them this way

and that in anger for a few seconds before stopping, leaning his hands against the rug; they clench into fists under his weight.

“Why couldn’t you just do as I told you, Levi?” Erwin asks, his voice breaking, his breathing heavy. “Why couldn’t you just go?”

Levi remains quiet, reaching out his hand to brush his fingers against Erwin’s, but the man pulls his away.

“Don’t,” he whispers, covering his face and gasping. “Don’t look at me, Levi. Just don’t…”

Levi shuffles closer to Erwin on the floor and sits down next to him, fighting to keep his hand from reaching over and touching him. He can’t understand the sudden shortness of Erwin’s breath or the sudden tears on his face until he pulls a razor out of his pocket with a trembling hand. It falls on the sheets of paper on the floor with a resounding thud that makes Levi shudder.

“What have I done, Levi?” Erwin asks him, gasping for breath, staring at his hands as if they were tainted with blood. “What have I done? What have I done?”

“Nothing,” Levi tries, his gaze shifting between Erwin’s face and hands. “You haven’t done anything. She left, Erwin. She took her things and she left. You didn’t do anything to her, Erwin. You didn’t.”

“Levi, I—” The distance in Erwin’s eyes makes Levi want to panic. “He didn’t tell me it would be her. Osterhaus… He knew and he didn’t tell me, I… I was going to—”

“You didn’t,” Levi says again, not knowing what else to do. “You didn’t hurt her, Erwin. Not this time. You’re going to save her, and her children. You’re going to—”

“Who am I, Levi?” Erwin asks staring at him, so lost and confused Levi can feel his own breath catching in his throat. “All the things I’ve done, Levi. How can I live with all the things I’ve done?”

For a few seconds Erwin’s face disappears from Levi’s view until he blinks away the tears, takes Erwin’s hand in his and says, “With me, Erwin. I’ll always be the good you’ve done.”

Only in the early hours of the morning does Levi feel it’s safe to leave Erwin’s side. He’s sleeping soundly by then, calmed to rest by a warm bath and Levi’s fingers in his hair. Levi doesn’t wake him as he goes, walking swiftly through the city in slumber, the decision forming in his mind lending speed to his feet. He reminds himself of it all when he walks: the way Erwin sat in the tub, slumped over, his body useless, how Levi had to tell him it was time to go when the water had grown cold to the touch; the way he lay in bed, curled up like a wounded animal, taking hours to relax under Levi’s hands. He knows who to blame now, knows where to direct that fear and anger, knows all too well whose fault it all is.

He passes the Frauenkirche but turns away from the bridge, continuing into a different direction and a vastly different neighbourhood. He passes on the golden cage again, walking up the stairs soundlessly to the topmost floor, not caring about smudging the brass knocker this time. Levi counts the minutes it takes the man to answer.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing here?” Darlett hisses his greeting to Levi, who only unclenches his jaw to reply.

“I need your help with something.”

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Due to the length of the chapter I had to make it into two separate chapters instead which might explain why this one is a little bit different content-wise. Next update deadline is May 6th.

I *must* thank my fellow Eruriholics Anonymous for their unwavering support!

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Darlett pulls his dressing gown more tightly around himself as he shifts his weight on his slipper-clad feet, staring down at Levi angrily before glancing up and down the hallway and stepping aside to let Levi into the apartment.

“Do you have any idea,” he starts as soon as the door is closed, “what a prime example of gross misconduct your showing up here is?”

“I wouldn’t have come here if–” Levi starts but the man cuts him off quickly.

“I don’t want to hear it,” he hisses, running a hand through his reddish hair. “This is absolutely unacceptable, and quite frankly I didn’t expect this even from you – which admittedly was my mistake. I don’t know what you think could ever be important enough to justify barging in here in the middle of the night, and I don’t care to. So if you could just–”

“I wouldn’t have come here if I’d had a choice,” Levi finishes his earlier sentence in an irritated whisper. “I already told you, I need your help with something.”

“Go bother Erwin with it,” Darlett tells him dismissively. “I have no interest in helping you any more than I already have.”

“Erwin can’t help me,” Levi goes on despite Darlett’s words. “He can’t know about this. I don’t want him to.”

The man lets out an irritated sigh. “Spare me the details of the complications in your sordid little liaison,” he snaps as Levi grits his teeth. “I don’t see why I should have to pick up Erwin’s mess just because–”

“I’ll take care of another mission for you,” Levi hurries to promise, making Darlett sigh again. “I did a good job last time. We both know I did.”

The man seems to consider the words, finally conceding to utter, “Yes, fine. You completed the mission, I’ll give you that. But if you think that means I am somehow obligated to—”

“I don’t,” Levi says. “I know someone like you won’t do anything for anyone unless you stand to gain something. So what do you need? I’ll do anything.”

Darlett pauses again, measuring Levi with his narrowed eyes for a long while before crossing his arms over his chest and leaning his back to a wall. “Why?” he asks, his eyes narrowing even further. “Why is this so important?”

“Who says it is?”

The man lets out a dry laugh. “You show up here in the middle of the night, begging for my help and promising anything in return? I hope you’ll pardon me for saying it but the stench of desperation coming off you is as unmistakable as the stench of shit coming off a stableboy.”

Levi grits his teeth again. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

“If you ask for my help you make it my business,” Darlett tells him, his tone growing considerably colder. “So if you really want my assistance I suggest you tell me what you are planning, and why Erwin can’t know about it.”

Levi glances around himself in the opulent entrance hall, the dim glow of the sconce bouncing off the polished wood of both the floor and the delicate furniture. His mind seems muddled by lack of sleep as he tries to grasp a hold of his thoughts. Darlett can’t know about Osterhaus, that much is clear, but trying to come up with a lie seems more difficult than it has since that mission in the Albertstadt when the Nazi officer asked Levi for his name. Even now his thoughts keep slipping back to Erwin, how he needs to be there when the man wakes up.

“It has nothing to do with Erwin,” Levi finally says. “It’s a... personal thing.”

“A personal thing,” Darlett repeats and nods. “Well, since you explained it all to me in such a detailed and specific way I have absolutely no reservations about putting my neck on the line for—”

“It’s about that man,” Levi interrupts with a lie, glancing at Darlett before turning his eyes on the floor. “The one who worked in the SS headquarters in Berlin.”

Levi can hear Darlett sighing again. “And what about that man?”

“Things with him have... Well, he’s getting to be more trouble than I thought he would,” Levi fibs on calmly. “I thought I’d take care of it before things start to unravel.”

“You do realise I’m aware he left Dresden in early August?”

“He’s kept in touch,” Levi explains quickly, trying to think up something pressing enough for Darlett not to dismiss him, “and he’s coming back for a few days this month. I want to take care of it then.”

“And why shouldn’t Erwin know about it?” Darlett asks now, meeting Levi’s glare with an audible groan. “And what exactly would you need from me?”

“Just a gun,” Levi says. “Any gun will do, but I’d prefer a rifle, if you have one.”

“I suppose you think that unregistered firearms simply grow on trees,” Darlett mutters under his breath, massaging his left temple for a few seconds with the tips of his fingers before turning back to Levi. “Is he a threat to the operation?”

Levi shrugs. “The way he’s been talking I wouldn’t be too surprised,” he lies on. “He’s not very impressed with Erwin, that’s for sure.”

“When will you people learn?” Darlett starts, though it doesn’t seem he cares whether Levi hears him or not. “If you choose to act on it you’re only going to ruin your lives, and those of everyone around you. Why won’t you just learn a bit of decency?”

Levi wants to answer and tell the man he sure as hell never chose to be like this, but knowing no one forced him to reach out to Krieger, he keeps quiet and watches the decision forming on the man’s face.

“Just the rifle?” Darlett asks to make sure, and Levi hurries to nod. “And in return you’ll do whatever I ask of you?”

Levi squints up at the man. “It’s what I said, isn’t it?”

Darlett glances at the door one more time before turning to look at Levi again and it seems he’s calculating something in his mind, moving to stare further into the apartment before locking his gaze with Levi’s. Finally he grits his teeth and utters, “Follow me.”

He leads Levi through the silent apartment, past the lavish sitting room and into a dining room which he crosses with a few long strides while Levi struggles to keep up. They enter a kitchen – the lingering smell of frying fat makes Levi realise how hungry he is – and Darlett finally stops by two doors, of which he opens the narrower to reveal a staircase leading upward.

“Still sure you want my help?” the man asks Levi, who squints at the darkness at the top of the stairs for a few seconds before nodding decisively, letting Darlett take the lead again by the light of a torch he grabs from a nearby cupboard.

They walk up the squeaky steps, the beam from the torch bouncing on the worn wood as they climb, finally coming up to a little attic room, windowless with a slanted ceiling; servant’s quarters, though it seems they’ve gone unused for years. In the dim light Levi can spot boxes and crates and old furniture covered with sheets. In the middle of the mess of discarded household items Levi can just make out a mattress, the white linens piled on top shining dully in the torchlight.

“You can come out of there now,” Darlett calls out quietly into the darkness. “It’s just me and the... help.”

Levi watches as someone steps out of the shadows cautiously as if surveying their surroundings; someone who’s learned to be careful. He narrows his eyes and peers through the dark at the figure, who shields their eyes as they step closer to Darlett and the torch, hissing under their breath and though Levi can’t understand the language, he can tell the word is not a nice one.

“What’s all this about?” the figure speaks; the voice is a woman’s, heavy with a French accent and strangely lisping, as if she were unable to open her mouth properly. “Is there trouble? Have they found us?”

“No reason to worry,” Darlett assures her as he walks over to the far end of the room and lights a small lamp that hangs off the middlemost rafter that runs along the ceiling; they all blink in the sudden brightness. “There’s been a slight change of plan, that’s all.”

Levi looks at the woman as she swears again; she is only a little taller than he himself is, with blond hair cut much in the same style. There’s a large darkening bruise above her left eye and her bottom lip is split, surrounded by another purplish swelling around her chin. Her clothes are worn and dirty; a pair of oddly shapeless trousers and a woollen sweater, the knit of which has been torn, resulting in loose ends of yarn poking out here and there. She glances at Levi too and frowns before turning to Darlett.

“Who’s this?” she asks, sounding irritated.

“He’s one of Erwin’s,” Darlett explains in short, fighting with the torch for a moment before the light flickers out and dies. “He’ll be taking you to a safer location tonight.”

Levi can feel the woman’s eyes on him even as he keeps his own on Darlett and frowns.

“You expect me to trust him?” the woman asks, ever more annoyed. “After everything, you just expect me to go along with—”

“Don’t worry, he’s a Jew,” Darlett tells her indifferently, lighting a cigarette. “The only help the Nazis would want from him would be his ungenerous contribution to their textile industry.”

The woman gives Levi another quick glance and a small, acknowledging nod. “You say he’s one of Erwin’s?” she asks Darlett now, continuing after he grunts in agreement, “What happened to the orders about civilian rescue?”

“You know Erwin,” the man drawls and exhales. “The rules of mere mortals hardly apply.”

The woman scoffs at the statement as Levi’s mind is busily fighting to process Darlett’s words, trying to come to a conclusion about what the man meant by the safer location he mentioned. It takes Levi a good half a minute to realise had Darlett been talking about Erwin’s apartment he would have said so. And Erwin took part in the mission to get her here,

didn't he? If they had wanted her to stay with him they would have placed her there in the first place.

"I need to talk to you for a minute," Levi tells Darlett, nodding toward the stairwell and leading the man down a few narrow steps before turning to him and asking, "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"You said you'd do anything," Darlett reminds Levi of his words, making him shake his head angrily.

"Well obviously I can't fucking do this," he says, gesturing upward toward the attic room. "I don't live alone, you fucking oaf. How am I supposed to explain to—"

"However you explained Erwin to them, I'd imagine," the man tells him disinterestedly. "In any case, it's hardly my problem. You said you wanted my help and asked me to name a price. This is my price."

"What am I supposed to do with her?" Levi asks now, rolling his eyes at Darlett's shrug.

"Just keep her hidden, keep her out of harm's way until we can find someone to... extract her," the man explains so nonchalantly that Levi feels like punching him in the face. "You sneak her in once and you sneak her out in a few weeks. A much simpler job than your previous mission, all things considered."

"How the fuck do you reckon this is easier?" Levi demands, his voice lowering to a growl. "I can't just—"

"You listen to me you little shit," Darlett suddenly hisses, leaning so close to Levi he can smell the cigarette on his breath. "You came into my home without authorisation in the middle of the night asking for a personal favour to which you are in no way entitled. You told me you would do anything in exchange for said favour but as soon as it's something you'd rather not do, you cry foul. Now, it's starting to look to me as if you're operating under the misapprehension that my supply of patience is endless when the truth is you're just lucky my wife and daughter aren't here, since had that been the case I would have strangled you right there on the threshold."

Levi feels a shudder running down his spine and he grits his teeth against it as Darlett straightens his back and stares down at him along the length of his nose.

"I think you're both forgetting who's in charge here," Darlett whispers and takes a deep drag off his cigarette. "I'll give you a minute to consider your options."

Levi stands alone in the narrow stairwell and tries to think, tries to fill his mind with any rational thought, finding instead just that image of Erwin crouched down on the floor, the razor slipping from his fingers, the look of confusion on his face as he turned to Levi for that guidance he is so bad at giving. That fucking swine Osterhaus – the thought makes Levi's jaw and hands clench. Wasn't it enough for him to force Erwin into something so despicable? Had the man left it at that Levi might have been able to let it go, since it seemed like something Erwin could survive, but this... With this he made it personal, he made it

something he could laugh about on that tropical island of his until the peaceful end of his days, and Levi knows that image is never going to let him be: Osterhaus sitting on the terrace of some seaside villa, retelling the story for the hundredth time to a gaggle of well-dressed war criminals, nearly choking on his champagne from laughing. It's just speculation, a sick figment of Levi's imagination but even that is like torture, it burns in his mind like no anger ever has, forcing him into a decision: no matter what happens, Osterhaus can't live this down. Not this.

He walks back up the stairs sullenly, giving Darlett a curt nod when their eyes meet, expecting a smug look from the man but getting back a gesture similar to his own.

"I'll leave the introductions to you," he tells them, putting out his cigarette on an old saucer left sitting on top of a sheet-covered table. "I hope you both realise I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't honestly believe it to be the best course of action under the circumstances."

Levi clicks his tongue but the woman seems to agree. "They are growing suspicious of you?" she asks Darlett, who shrugs.

"They're growing suspicious of everyone," he mutters, nodding toward Levi. "Less so of nobodies like this one, though, so you should be fine."

The woman nods again before turning her eyes on Levi. "I hope you won't let me down," she tells him in a low voice. "I'm warning you now. If you betray me, I'll kill you without so much as blinking."

"Sounds fair enough to me," Levi responds and shrugs. "I'd rather take a bullet to the head than sell anyone out to those Nazi fucks."

The woman laughs quietly; a strange sound after all the seriousness of the night. "I prefer the knife," she says, "but I understand what you mean."

"Well isn't this lovely?" Darlett suddenly puts in. "I should have realised you two would have so much in common."

"Should I tell Erwin about this?" Levi suddenly thinks to ask the man, ignoring the comment and frowning at the shrug he gets as a response.

"Only if you care to explain why you've offered your assistance," Darlett counters, reading Levi's decision on his face and shaking his head. "The fewer people know about this move, the better, in any case."

"How long before you can get me out of Dresden?" The woman catches Darlett's attention again.

"It's difficult to say," he tells her. "Some weeks, most likely."

She swears again under her breath and sighs. "Well, I guess I'm lucky to be alive, so I shouldn't complain."

Darlett agrees in a grunt, plunging his hand in his pocket and pulling out a gun which is followed soon after by a wrist watch. "You two should get going," he tells them quietly. "They'll be lining up to the bakers' in a few hours."

Levi nods, standing still to wait for the woman to gather her belongings, but she seems to have nothing to take. At the door Darlett hands her a dark overcoat, the collar of which she turns up under a flat, moth-eaten cap that hides most of her short blond hair. When they're walking down the street Levi glances at her and realises to all the world they must seem like an odd pair; two strangely stunted men making their way across the city. Despite the disguise, Levi takes her through side alleys and half-abandoned neighbourhoods to avoid unwanted attention, though taking more time to get home makes him nervous. Even while looking for those flashes of uniforms, Levi's thoughts are on Erwin and the lighter the edges of sky above the buildings grow, the more anxious Levi is to get back to him.

Levi looks at the woman again from the corner of his eye. It seems strange to suddenly meet someone new, especially under these circumstances, and it takes Levi a moment to stop wondering how to explain her presence to Isabel and Farlan long enough to realise he doesn't even know her name.

"I'm Levi," he tells her under his breath, crossing the empty Albert Bridge. "What's your name?"

"Nanaba," she whispers back, glancing behind her over her shoulder. "We are going to your home?"

Levi nods. "I live with some friends," he tells her quietly. "They don't know about any of this. They just think Erwin's helping me to save his own arse when the war ends."

"What will you tell them?" she asks him, shaking her head at his shrug. "Why would you take this risk?"

"Darlett promised he'd help me with something," Levi explains in short, pushing his hands deeper into his pockets in a desperate attempt to keep his fingers warm. "Said he wouldn't unless I helped you."

Nanaba swears breathily in her own language before spitting on the ground. "Bastard. He kept me cooped up in that little fucking room for days now and now this. Chickens live better than I did."

Levi scoffs as they get off the bridge and continue on their way between the buildings, alert but tired. "I try not to have anything to do with him unless I have to."

"He can be a nasty person," she says, "but he knows what he's doing. Him and Erwin are the best – they would not still be alive if they weren't. But we shouldn't talk about this here."

Levi agrees quietly and falls silent. The mention of Erwin's name has made him wonder again what time it is; would Erwin be awake already, filling the bowl on the washstand with water to shave, get ready for the day? Would he still be sleeping? How would Erwin feel if he woke up without him there? Even as they near the apartment, Levi finds it difficult to focus,

barely thinking to tell Nanaba to keep her head bent as they enter the building and sneak up the stairs as soundlessly as they can, lucky in not running into anyone, not even Frau Niemeyer on one of her nightly visits to the communal bathroom.

“Stay here,” Levi tells Nanaba after closing the door behind them; the rooms beyond it are heavy with silence and Levi walks through them on tiptoes to place his hand on Farlan’s shoulder, shaking him gently out of his sleep and muttering, “Don’t turn on the lights. I need to talk to you.”

“What time is it?” Farlan murmurs, sitting up in the bed and rubbing his eyes. “It’s still dark out.”

“It’s early. I’ve just come back,” Levi tells him quickly. “Are you awake? I need to talk to you.”

“Yes, I’m awake. You just woke me up,” the man tells him, sounding irritated. “What’s so important that you couldn’t let me sleep?”

“Something’s come up,” Levi starts, shaking his head when he sees the instant panic on Farlan’s face. “Nothing to worry about, just... Something I need to tell you.”

“Well what is it?” the man demands, sighing in annoyance.

“I didn’t come back alone,” Levi starts, stopping when Farlan sighs again.

“If you and Erwin want the bed you should’ve just said so to begin with,” he mutters, making Levi stop for a moment before he shakes his head again.

“Not Erwin,” he corrects Farlan, feeling that anxious nudge in his chest again as he speaks the man’s name. “Someone else.”

At that Farlan freezes completely for a second, his face flushing out of all colour as he sits up more rigidly and glances at the door. “Well who is it then?”

Levi hesitates for a moment. “Her name is Nanaba,” he starts, struggling to form the words in his mind within that cloud of exhaustion. “She’s... a friend.”

“What?” Farlan asks, his frown growing deeper above his narrowed eyes. “Whose?”

“Mine,” Levi says. “Sort of, anyway. She needs a place to stay so I brought her here.”

There’s something unpleasant in Farlan’s voice when he says, “Why does she need a place to stay?”

Levi sighs, glancing out of the window at the short stretches of horizon he can catch between the buildings; the sky is growing a pale grey as they speak. “Look,” he starts, sensing Farlan’s glare though their eyes don’t meet. “No one saw her come in, and no one is going to see her leave. She’ll stay quiet, just like she wasn’t even here. It’s not as if we’re in any more trouble if someone found her here.”

“Why does she need a place to stay?” Farlan repeats in a low voice, crossing his arms over his chest defiantly.

Levi thinks back to all of those moments when he has wished he didn’t have to keep lying to Farlan and Isabel, and it’s suddenly difficult to believe it has all lead to this, just because Darlett was too much of a selfish bastard to offer Levi even such a miserly amount of assistance. He thinks about Nanaba in the hallway and how she’s running just like they are, just like Isabel was when Levi offered her a place to sleep and a few warm meals. He looks at the expression on Farlan’s face, imagines how it would change should Levi tell him the truth, though he can’t picture how it would make Farlan feel – angry, disappointed, betrayed?

“She’s from France,” Levi finally says, knowing his words make little sense. “I don’t know how she ended up here, just that she’s in trouble and that she needs my help.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Farlan hisses. “What is she, some kind of a... some kind of a criminal?”

“No,” Levi counters quickly. “She’s... I don’t know. Please, Farlan, just... You have to trust me on this. I can’t explain it to you right now but if you just take my word–”

“Where the hell did you meet this person?!” Farlan asks, his voice growing louder. “How the hell can you be sure she’s not a–”

“I told you, I can’t explain it,” Levi repeats. “She’s just like us, Farlan. She just needs somewhere to stay for a few weeks and–”

“A few weeks?!”

“Just...” Levi lifts up his hand to interrupt the man. “Her life is in danger, Farlan. I thought it would be something you’d understand.”

Farlan’s expression grows sullen as he glares at Levi from under that floppy strand of hair falling over his eyes. “Are you asking for my permission?”

“No,” Levi admits. “She’s going to stay here, no matter what you say.”

Farlan sneers. “So it’s not as if there’s anything I could do about it even if I wanted to,” he mutters poisonously under his breath.

“No one will ever know she’s been here,” Levi promises, though he knows he shouldn’t. “Don’t ask me anything more about this. I swear I’ll explain it all when the time is right.”

“When the time is right,” Farlan repeats and sneers again.

“And don’t say anything to Erwin either,” Levi has Farlan promise. “I don’t want him to know about this.”

“I just hope to God that whatever it is you’re up to won’t put Isabel in danger,” Farlan tells him, looking even more disappointed and angry than Levi feared. “If anything happens to her because of this, I will never forgive you Levi.”

“And you shouldn’t,” Levi agrees, getting up from the bed. “I promise it won’t–”

“Don’t,” Farlan interrupts him snappishly. “It’s not in your hands to keep that.”

He gets out of bed quickly and Levi follows him out of the room, surprised to see the entrance hall empty until a small glimmer of light leads them both into the kitchen where Nanaba is sitting at the table with Isabel, playing klüberjass in the light of a solitary candle. Levi watches Farlan as he walks forward and extends his hand, introducing himself to her before getting busy with tea.

“Those bruises look bad,” he tells her as he starts lighting a fire under the stove. “We don’t have any ice, but I could get you a towel and some cold water.”

She shakes her head. “They barely hurt now, but thank you, you’re very kind,” she says, wincing a little as she attempts a smile.

“Why do you have bruises, Nan?” Isabel asks her and Levi can’t help smiling at how quickly they’ve gotten so friendly.

“Oh, it was nothing,” Nanaba assures her. “I’ll tell you some other time, alright?”

Isabel agrees in a nod and starts going over her cards again. “In this house no one needs to talk about awful things,” she tells her quietly, “but you can, if you want to.”

Levi watches as Nanaba looks up at her, surprised for a moment before her lips spread to another uncomfortable smile. “It seems just the place for me then.”

Farlan lights a few more candles and they all sit down for tea, not talking about anything in particular though Levi can tell those questions are right at the tip of Farlan’s tongue. Levi can sense the man’s gaze shifting between Nanaba and himself, as if he’s trying to find those answers just by staring at them long enough, and Levi can almost guess the conclusions he’s coming to. He tries to remind himself that them knowing this little of the matter isn’t dangerous, that the details are what would put their lives at risk, but at the end of it all he’s not sure he even believes that himself. Those questions he imagines Farlan having remind him again of Erwin, and he empties his cup quickly before standing up, to everyone’s surprise, it seems.

“I have to go,” he barely whispers. “Will you three be alright?”

“Where are you going?” Farlan asks him before Isabel gets a chance to, glancing at Nanaba like he’s nervous to be left alone with her.

“I have to get back to Erwin,” Levi explains briefly. “There’s something he needs my help with.”

“This early?” Farlan says, glancing at the clock on the wall. “Have you slept at all last night?”

Levi shakes his head as he pulls on his overcoat. “I have to go,” he says again. “Keep acting normal. And Nanaba, keep your voice down.”

Levi barely has time to see her nod before he leaves the apartment, gritting his teeth against the cold wind as he walks once more through the city that is now starting to wake up; as Darlett said, the queues are forming in front of the bakeries and butchers' shops. Levi passes them quickly, his mind far ahead of his feet. Would he find Erwin lying on the bed, staring mutely at the ceiling, refusing the breakfast Levi would carry to him? Would Erwin look at him with disdain born from his own shame at having broken down in front of him, at having shown that weakness? Levi can feel a sudden panic constricting his lungs as he rushes up the stone steps, finding when he walks through the door neither Erwin's contempt nor his frailty, but a handful of neat, empty rooms he begins to haunt like a ghost until he finally curls up on the sofa and falls asleep, worn out by the worry growing in his heart.

He wakes up to the sound of the door closing and sits up, his head spinning slightly for a minute as he tries to adjust to the afternoon light that's pouring in through the sitting room windows. Through the haze of interrupted sleep, Levi listens to the sounds carrying in from the entrance, the soft clinking of keys, the rustling as Erwin shrugs out of his coat, the soft thuds of his boots as he walks in through the double doors, stopping as he sees Levi, his frown softening instantly as their eyes meet.

"You're here," Erwin says quietly and Levi nods, following the man with his eyes as he sits down on the armchair and lets out a deep sigh.

"Where were you?" Levi asks him, his own frown as deep as ever as something behind Erwin catches his eye; the topmost drawer of the secretaire is missing a piece of wood above the lock.

"At work," Erwin tells him quietly. "Not going was hardly an option."

"You haven't slept," Levi points out, not sure why he's growing suddenly angry. "You need to rest. You're not taking care of yourself."

"Levi—"

"No," Levi interrupts him, getting to his feet and starting to pace back and forth though he doesn't understand why. "You should have stayed here. You look like shit. Have you even eaten anything today?"

"Levi, I—"

"Shut up, Erwin," Levi almost snaps now, eyes flying to the secretaire, that tightness from before suddenly back in his chest. "You can't keep acting like you're fucking stupid when you know better. You can't just keep acting like everyone else matters more than you do, and like your life isn't worth shit."

"Please, Levi. Let me—"

"No," Levi growls; he wants to rub that ache out of his chest, to hold Erwin close again, to tell him it's all going to be alright, but he can't. "What the fuck happened, Erwin? How the

fuck did it get to this?"

"Please, Levi. Calm down."

There's something about Erwin's voice that stops Levi in his tracks and roots him into the moment; a pleading softness, not for his own sake but for Levi's, like seeing him so upset is painful for Erwin. He meets the man's eyes from across the room; his gaze is steady and present now, but it doesn't ease the hold of the knot at the pit of Levi's stomach. Erwin stands up as well and walks over to Levi, placing a hand on his shoulder; the touch, like the voice, is grounding, warming something in Levi under that cold dread.

"Please," Erwin says again, sounding suddenly weary. "Let's make some tea, like we always do."

Levi lets those words guide him closer and he takes Erwin's hand in his, moving it on the skin of his neck where it stays for a while, warm and strong, before sliding to the back of his head to pull him closer still, against Erwin who is still here to hold him, to be held. Levi breathes in the smell of his sweat and the cigarettes and lets go of as much of the night as he can, letting his body begin sharing the burden before his mind is able to. He can feel Erwin leaning his cheek against the top of his head like he's telling Levi they can both do that, to carry and rest each in turn, to be strong and tired, resilient and hurt, knowing there's someone to keep up the guard.

Levi breaks away from the embrace and leads Erwin to the kitchen, letting the man take a seat at the table while he puts the kettle on, pulling out a loaf of thick-crust bread and a chunk of cheese. He carries them to the table and starts cutting thick slices out of both, feeling the clutch of dread change into the discomfort of hunger.

"I haven't eaten since yesterday," he tells Erwin after biting into his sandwich, placing another one in front of the man and glaring at him until he picks it up and takes a bite – more to shut him up than to feed himself, Levi doesn't doubt.

"You were gone when I woke up."

It's not a question; Erwin doesn't demand answers, not from Levi, not anymore.

"I had to go home," he lies, hating how easy it is. "In case there was an air raid."

Erwin nods. "You had done more than enough by then."

"Stop that," Levi tells him instantly, his hand nearly slipping as he cuts the cheese. "It's nothing you haven't done for me."

"I never wanted to burden—"

"I told you to stop it," Levi snaps again, throwing another sandwich in front of Erwin though he's barely touched the first. "It's not for you to decide what burdens me. You really think I can't cope with something like that?"

“I’m sorry,” Erwin apologises at once. “I never meant to imply you aren’t capable. No one else could do the things you do for me, Levi. Please know that.”

Levi clicks his tongue but doesn’t speak, taking another large bite out of his slice of bread before walking over to the kettle to start brewing the tea. He carries the pot and two cups to the table, taking a seat across from Erwin, staring at him until he lets out a heavy sigh.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin says again, his eyes looking for Levi’s. “I never meant to scare you. I never meant for you to see me like that.”

Levi pours the tea without knowing what to say, recognising his fear only now when Erwin names it. He was afraid, lashing out just like Erwin did last night, holding on to another emotion instead, something more tangible and easier to admit. He passes Erwin his cup before pouring a drop of milk into his own.

“Finish your sandwich,” Levi tells the man who obeys without delay this time. “I can stay until evening, so we can talk later. You need a bath. Some sleep wouldn’t be bad either, but I guess you might as well just make it an early night.”

“Yes, sir,” Erwin says, smiling into his cup of tea as Levi rolls his eyes.

“Don’t you try to be funny with me,” Levi counters, though seeing Erwin’s smile widen makes him feel relieved. “I’m serious, Erwin. If you’re not going to take care of yourself, the least you can do is let me tell you how to do it.”

“I assure you, I wasn’t trying to be funny,” the man tells him disarmingly. “I’m a soldier, remember? I know how to take orders from my superiors.”

Levi clicks his tongue and drinks his tea, feeling a touch of heat rising to his cheeks. “Just... Eat your sandwich.”

Afterwards Levi walks Erwin into the bedroom, drawing the bath while the man undresses. He fetches the soap and washcloth as Erwin sits down in the tub and sighs contentedly, stretching his legs out as far as he’s able. Levi glances enviously at the water; the long walks followed by hours of sleep have coated his skin in dried sweat, making him feel dirty from head to toe. Still he rolls up his sleeves and dips the rag of a towel into the bath before coating it with soap and running it gently across Erwin’s shoulders.

“I should be the one doing this to you,” the man mutters, groaning as Levi presses the cloth harder against the tight muscles in his neck. “You’ve been through too much because of—”

Levi’s scoff cuts him short. “You don’t honestly think I haven’t been through worse,” he tells Erwin who doesn’t answer for a long time.

“I saw you,” he finally whispers, something breaking in his voice. “When I lost my temper. You flinched, and you backed away from me.”

Levi lets the washcloth fall into the water as his hands come to grip the side of the tub. “Erwin,” he says quietly, frowning as the realisation starts to dawn on him. “You don’t think

I'm--"

"I'm sorry," Erwin interrupts him, as if he doesn't want to hear those words. "The situation was difficult, and I handled it poorly. I never meant for you to find me so threatening."

Levi stays quiet, not knowing what to say, trying to gauge the full measure of what Erwin has just told him. He doesn't remember flinching, doesn't remember being afraid of Erwin, just being afraid for him, but thinking back it's possible he could have. Erwin was in his uniform, he was aggressive, to anyone watching he must have seemed like all the things Levi has grown up fearing. But even then he was Erwin, always just Erwin, the person who has cared for Levi more than anyone else he can remember, the one who has led Levi back to wanting to be touched, the one who has saved his life a hundred times over.

"Erwin," Levi says again, but looking at the rigidity of the man's posture, the way his head is bent like he's avoiding Levi's eyes, he can't find the words. Instead he stands up quickly and undresses, feeling Erwin's eyes moving on him as he steps into the tub and shuffles closer to the man, sitting down between Erwin's legs and pressing his forehead against his broad chest.

"Levi--"

"I'm more afraid of your filth in this bathtub than I am of anything you might do," Levi mutters, fingers brushing against the downy hair on Erwin's legs, made feather-soft by the warm water. "I didn't expect it so I spooked a little, that's all."

"Are you sure?" Erwin asks, his hands halting again until Levi grabs them firmly and moves them on his back. "I'd never forgive myself if--"

"Stop it," Levi tells him at once. "I've seen you kill a man right there in your bedroom, and maybe considering all of that it makes no sense, but I've never felt so safe with anyone before. So you can stop saying shit like that."

He can feel Erwin relaxing again, the hands on his back come alive and start tracing the column of his spine as he sighs into Levi's hair.

"Might as well stop thinking about it too," Levi mutters, smiling a little at the chuckle he feels Erwin let out.

"You have no idea how relieved I am to hear you say that," he says, his fingers tracing the borders on Levi's body that he's already learned by heart. "All day I thought you'd left because you didn't feel comfortable in my bed."

Levi sneers to mask the pain in his chest, picking up the washcloth and starting to scrub Erwin's arms with it. "It's where you're headed after this," he tells the man who sighs.

"Yes, Levi," he says again, giving in to Levi's orders. "I'll try to take better care of myself in the future."

Levi nods sternly, lifting his eyes to Erwin's face as he runs the piece of towel up to his neck. He sees the scratch on his cheek and smooths his thumb over it almost absent-mindedly.

"It doesn't hurt," Erwin answers the question he didn't ask.

Levi nods again, dipping the cloth in the water and wringing it above Erwin's head, smiling as the man shakes the wetness from his hair and rubs at his face. For a moment the smile threatens to falter and turn into a frown but Levi keeps it in place, hoping the expression is comforting enough as he looks Erwin in the eye. It seems some of the pain is gone now, and maybe at the end of the day it's all that Levi can hope to do.

They finish bathing and crawl into bed, shivering under the sheet for a few minutes before the air around them grows warm. Levi keeps his eyes on Erwin's profile, imagining running his finger along that bump on the bridge of his nose but keeping his hands on the pillow. He knows what needs to come next, and just as he begins to wonder whether he needs to lead Erwin to talking, the man begins to speak.

"I'm sure you have many questions," he whispers, turning to Levi who nods. "Before all that I'd like you to know that it seems Lilian has decided to leave. She won't pose a threat to either one of us now. Should she contact the authorities from abroad, she would risk incriminating her husband even further, and I doubt she's vindictive enough to go that far."

"What happened?" Levi asks, not knowing what else to say; his mind has gone over the events so many times that they've started to feel unreal, less like a memory and more like a story he's heard someone telling him.

"I came home and found Lilian in the sitting room," Erwin tells him quietly. "She had pried open the secretaire with a crowbar and gone through the files. If she thought I was a traitor to the Reich before, what she found corrected that assumption very quickly."

"How did she get in?" Levi asks next and Erwin sighs.

"The porter must have let her in," he guesses. "She's seen Lilian here many times. It wouldn't have been difficult for her to come up with some excuse to be allowed into the apartment."

"And the razor?"

Levi watches Erwin's expression grow sad and tired and full of regret even now, and suddenly the anger from before is back. He thinks about Nanaba in his apartment with Farlan and Isabel, the irritation in Farlan's voice, his own feeble explanations, and finds a confirmation in his own resentment for all his actions since he last parted with Erwin.

"I could tell someone was in the apartment so I..." Erwin starts and clears his throat. "I felt I couldn't risk a gun – the neighbours might have heard it."

Levi doesn't need to ask the next question: learning it was Lilian, was Erwin prepared to go through with it? The answer is everywhere on his face even now, just like it was the night before, in his orders for Levi to see to the laundry, in the way the blade fell out of his hand.

Quietly Levi wonders whether it changes anything, knowing this about Erwin, knowing how far he's willing to go, how much he's willing to sacrifice.

"I regret so many things about it now," Erwin whispers, "how it was with Lilian. I should have ended it a long time ago. I let my loneliness cloud my judgment, and the price she almost paid for it—"

"Almost," Levi reminds him. "You're giving her a chance to start over now. From what I gather she didn't have many friends left here anyway."

Erwin utters a laugh, joyless and bitter. "She was right," he says. "I'm sending her to a foreign country with two small children and little money."

"It's how most people leave when they're running from something," Levi reminds the man. "Do you think everyone who's left Europe in the last ten years has been leaving alone with a fortune?"

Erwin falls quiet, staring up at the ceiling, and Levi can tell he's considering what he's just said.

"It's all just a fucking coincidence," Levi says. "How the fuck were you supposed to know that fucking swine Osterhaus had an agreement with her husband?"

"He must have given Lilian my address knowing she'd recognise it," Erwin muses, sounding weary. "That thought must have brought him so much pleasure – Lilian learning the truth and reminding me of what a hypocrite I am."

"Stop it," Levi tells him, his voice half plea and half command. "Don't you fucking dare compare yourself to them. Not where I can hear you."

Erwin sighs and reaches over to the drawer of his nightstand, pulling out a cigarette case and lighting one. Levi crinkles his nose until Erwin stands up to crack open the window, letting in a burst of cold air that makes Levi hide his hands under the covers. He's shivering by the time Erwin returns, craving Erwin's heat and trapping his body under his own and leaning his chin against his hands. They're quiet for a long while before Levi looks up at that blue of Erwin's eyes, half-hidden by lids that seem to be growing heavier by the minute, and remembers his own tiredness, the sleepless night and the hours of rest during the day that seem to have left him as groggy as he was before.

"I sleep better when you're here," Erwin tells him in a mumble, brushing his fingers lazily against Levi's arm. "Always more soundly, knowing where you are. Knowing you're safe."

Levi agrees in a grunt, pushing one of his legs under Erwin's. There's something he likes about the man's weight on him, if even just a limb on limb; something tangible and familiar that makes him close his eyes and push against the touch.

"I suppose I have some sleepless nights ahead of me," Erwin whispers. "I expect I'll sleep very poorly after I leave Dresden."

Levi's eyes fly open and the sudden ache in his chest makes him draw a sharp breath that Erwin seems to miss in his tired state. Levi wonders if he's aware of the effect of his words, of bringing the future into this moment, and he hurries to change the subject.

"I'm sorry I left this morning," Levi mutters, forcing himself to relax again under Erwin's touch. "I wouldn't have if--"

"It's fine, Levi. I don't blame you," the man assures him, bringing his hand to rest on Levi's neck. "We both have a life outside of this."

"I want to know more about yours," Levi tells him, that curiosity piercing his tiredness. "Not now, but one day."

"I'll be happy to tell you," Erwin says, eyes closing and mouth splitting into a yawn. "Whatever you want to know."

Levi shifts on the bed, catching Erwin's thigh between his and pressing his cheek under the man's arm. It feels so natural now, the nudity, the closeness, the space they share in this bed – almost routine, like they've been doing this for years, like they've been growing closer even when they've been apart. Levi runs his fingers over the soft hair on Erwin's chest absently, glancing up at his face every now and again to determine how deep his sleep is, only getting up when the man's mouth has fallen open and he has started to snore softly. Levi dresses quietly and gathers some food from the kitchen before slipping out of the apartment, barely taking notice of his surroundings as he returns to his home, his thoughts still on Erwin – so often on Erwin these days.

As he walks up the stairs he lets out a few loud coughs, surprised when he finds they don't seem to have alerted Farlan and Isabel to his arrival. He finds them in the kitchen with Nanaba, chuckling breathlessly in hushed voices as they play cards. Farlan jumps up as Levi lays the groceries on the table, heaving a heavy sigh as Levi coughs again.

"I'll fix us up some supper," he still says cheerfully enough. "Did you have dinner with Erwin?"

Levi shakes his head. "Just a few slices of bread," he replies, taking a seat at the table across from Isabel and Nanaba.

"Nan taught us a new game, big brother, you have to learn it too!" Isabel tells him, earning a shush from Farlan for how loudly she says it. "And she's teaching us to say all kinds of nasty things in French."

"Honestly, you wouldn't believe the things she says," Farlan puts in as well and Levi glances at Nanaba, who smirks, scratching the back of her head. "She's even worse than you are."

"I have met some interesting people," she explains, "who have taught me interesting things."

"If you can call knowing how to say 'go take a swim in a river of horse shit' interesting," Farlan remarks and laughs while peeling a potato. "I never knew how useless my lessons at school were until now."

“All the best things in life are learned outside of school,” she asserts, “and all the best people are met when you least expect it.”

“Do you mean me?” Isabel asks in an excited whisper.

“Of course I mean you, Isabel,” Nanaba tells her, grabbing her face with her hands and planting a sloppy kiss on her cheek. When she notices Farlan’s half a smile she laughs and says, “You too, Farlan.”

“Oh, I wasn’t...” he starts but ends up laughing. “Thank you, Nan, that’s very kind of you to say.”

“I guess you’ve all had a fun day,” Levi notes, getting three enthusiastic nods as a reply.

“And you?” Farlan asks. “Did it work out well with Erwin?”

“Did what work out well?” Levi asks, rubbing at his eyes and yawning.

“That thing he needed your help for,” Farlan says emphatically. “Before you left you said he needed your help with something.”

Levi frowns and tries to think back to that morning; it feels like a separate day from this one, and the details are quickly beginning to blur, leaving Levi with no choice but to shrug.

“It worked out fine,” he replies.

“How is Erwin?” Nanaba asks Levi now. “The last time I saw him he looked very tired.”

“He’s fine,” Levi says, doing his best to ignore Farlan and Isabel’s confused expressions. “He overworks himself, that’s all.”

“You know Erwin too?” Isabel asks Nanaba who nods, making Farlan’s frown grow deeper.

“He helps me sometimes, like he helps all of you,” she explains and Levi is relieved she remembers.

“How did you end up in Dresden?” Farlan asks her suddenly, placing a lid on top the pot of potatoes, clearly not caring enough now to try and be subtle.

Levi sees Nanaba flinch. “I’m sorry,” she whispers, meeting Farlan’s eyes. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

He keeps looking at her for a few seconds before nodding sombrely and casting a glance at Levi before turning back to the cooking, calling out a question in French over his shoulder after peeling an onion. Nanaba frowns for a moment before asking him something back – to Levi it sounds like Erwin’s name – and they continue talking. The words leave no impression on Levi other than a growing unease and irritation, but if it’s how Farlan needs to pay him back for his lies, he’ll say nothing about it. After a while they stop and Farlan switches back to his own language as if nothing has happened, serving them fried potatoes and onion, which Nanaba seems especially pleased by.

“You eat so well,” she whispers, a tone of wonderment in her voice. “Is this real butter?”

“Yes,” Farlan admits. “Doesn’t Erwin give you food?”

Nanaba stops to empty her mouth and to Levi it looks like she’s thinking. “That’s not how he helps me, no,” she finally says. “Let’s just hope my stomach can take it. I haven’t had real butter in a very long time.”

“What did you and Farlan talk about?” Levi asks when he gets a moment alone with her while he’s getting the sofa ready for her to sleep on.

“Oh, nothing much,” she says and chuckles. “He told me you and Erwin are sleeping together.”

Levi’s hands freeze for a moment in their task before he rolls his eyes, sighing and muttering, “Of course he did.”

“Don’t worry,” Nanaba comforts him. “I’ve known this about Erwin. I am not surprised that he likes you.”

“No?” Levi asks, thinking he’ll most likely always be surprised, and she laughs again breathily.

“You have many qualities that he admires in people,” she explains. “Honesty, courage – and a bit of roughness around the edges, from what I’ve seen.”

“He likes that, does he?” Levi mutters, folding up the quilt and placing it at the foot of the sofa as she nods.

“So I have heard,” she says, smiling warmly as she catches Levi’s gaze. “Thank you – for all of this.”

Levi shrugs. “I’m not just doing this out of the goodness of my heart, you know,” he says.

“I know,” she tells him, “but I’m grateful anyway. You’re all much better company than Flagon Darlett.”

Levi laughs quietly and wishes her goodnight, coughing on his way to the communal bathroom to clean himself before joining Farlan in bed. The other man is still sitting up, leaning onto the headboard with his arms crossed over his chest, looking to Levi like he’s ready to speak his mind. Feeling the exhaustion of the past few days suddenly down to his very bones, Levi does his best to ignore him, rolling onto his side and drawing his knees up; an inadequate replacement for the warmth of Erwin’s body.

“Levi,” Farlan finally starts sombrely after a few minutes of silence and Levi sighs, opening his eyes reluctantly. “I just want you to answer one question for me.”

“What is it?” Levi asks, turning onto his back and staring at the ceiling, trying to pay no attention to the bristling irritation he feels.

“I’ve been thinking about this,” the man goes on in a whisper. “You told me months ago that Erwin’s helping you so you can testify for him once the war ends. But that’s not the whole story.”

Levi sighs again but doesn’t speak, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“He doesn’t believe in the Reich,” Farlan goes on, sounding bitter. “He doesn’t believe in what the Führer says, not in any of the ‘delusions of Nazi ideology’ as he calls it. Does he?”

Levi folds his arms under his head and remains silent, staring up even though he can feel Farlan’s eyes on him, letting him continue with his observations despite the fact he’d rather join Nanaba in the sitting room even if it meant sleeping on the floor by the sofa.

“I know there are a lot of people in Austria who aren’t happy about the Anschluss,” the man continues, “and I think Erwin might be one of them. I think he’s always been one of them, and I think that’s why he’s helping you.”

“Are you waiting for me to confirm that?” Levi finally speaks. “I told you Farlan, I’m not going to be able to explain—”

“Just answer me this,” Farlan interrupts him, lowering his voice even further. “Are you and Erwin working for the resistance?”

“The what?” Levi asks him back, trying to think of anything that would bring the conversation to an early end.

“The resistance,” Farlan repeats. “Like the White Rose, like the French Resistance, people working against Germany.”

“No one’s working against Germany, Farlan,” Levi snaps, angered even further by the realisation he doesn’t actually know the answer. “I told you, I can’t talk about this.”

“If Erwin knows Nanaba, why can’t he know she’s staying here?”

“I’m not going to say this again, Farlan,” Levi growls, glaring at the other man. “I can’t talk about this, and Erwin can’t know she’s here. That’s all I’m going to tell you and if you don’t see by now that it’s for your own good then there’s nothing more I can do for you.”

“Do you have any idea what kind of a risk you’re taking?” Farlan hisses at him suddenly. “Do you have any idea what kind of danger you’ve put us all—”

“Stop acting like such a fucking idiot,” Levi growls, his eyes stinging with lack of sleep, his body weak and heavy from exhaustion. “You’ve been in the same kind of danger ever since you first let Christofer fuck you. You’ve made it worse for yourself by letting me live with you. The danger has always been there, Farlan. All I’m doing is trying to have all of this mean something before they fucking kill me too.”

Levi rolls over to his side again, listening to Farlan's heavy breathing for a long while before the man finally turns off the lights and pulls the covers on himself. Levi knows he should apologise, if even in a whisper aimed at Farlan's back, but he can't bring himself to do it. His thoughts feel heavy and unfocused and slow as hell, adding a new edge to his frustration. He can tell Farlan is awake even when he's nodding off, knows that the regret he feels will be all the worse in the morning, but allows himself to fall to a restless sleep; by the time he wakes up, he feels like he has barely rested and Farlan is nowhere to be found.

"He said he was going to do the shopping," Isabel tells Levi when he asks her, burning her finger trying to fish a piece of eggshell out of the skillet, "but I didn't see him take any money, so he was probably lying about that."

Levi nods and tries to look calmer than he feels to keep her from worrying when he says, "He probably had some in his pockets."

"Doubtful," she mutters, sliding a spatula under each of the eggs in turn to keep them from sticking to the pan. "He watches every coin like a hawk."

"Well I'm sure he's just..." Levi starts and sighs. "I'm sure he's just taking a walk."

"Because you two argued last night."

Levi sighs again. "I didn't want you to hear that."

Isabel shrugs indifferently, flinching a bit when some grease from the pan lands on her hand. "You only do it because you care about each other," she tells him. "I'd hate it more if you never fought at all."

They have breakfast with Nanaba, after which Isabel starts talking her through her U-Boats while Levi paces restlessly from room to room, eyes shooting at the clock every time he's not at the window, staring down onto the street. He catches bits and pieces of Isabel and Nanaba's whispered conversation: Isabel's telling her how she wants the war to end to be able to look for work, how she wants to buy a horse and a wagon and travel around the country selling jewellery made out of seashells; even amid the worrying, the thought makes Levi smile.

When Farlan finally returns late in the afternoon, he walks straight into the kitchen to get started on dinner; he looks tired, his expression strained, and when Levi walks over and places a hand on his arm, he shakes it off angrily.

"Don't," he merely says, cutting up a potato and throwing the pieces into the pot.

"Farlan," Levi whispers, "where have you been? Isabel said you went to do the shopping but you—"

"I went to church," the man replies. "You wouldn't understand so I won't try to explain why."

"I'm sorry for what I said yesterday," Levi says, only managing to make Farlan grit his teeth. "You know I'm only keeping all of it from you for your own—"

“Don’t you dare say it’s for my benefit,” Farlan tells him, turning to glare at him for a moment. “Don’t you dare say you’re doing any of it to keep me and Isabel safe.”

Levi stands there, stunned into silence and it takes him a moment to realise it’s his own guilt that’s rendering him speechless and not anything Farlan has just said.

“You’ll be relieved to know I don’t want anything to do with any of your secrets,” the man whispers angrily. “If anyone ever comes asking me about them, I don’t want to have anything more to tell them than the things I already know.”

It’s impossible to deny the tension in the apartment after that, and Levi thinks without Nanaba it would become unbearable. She keeps them all entertained with her stories of the little village she grew up in, many of which seem to Levi equally likely to be false as they do to be true. Still the evening passes slowly and when they finally go to sleep, Levi feels the rift between him and Farlan seeping into his dreams.

When the situation doesn’t seem likely to improve the following day, Levi decides to leave, pulling on his winter coat as soon as he’s finished the dishes from breakfast.

“Where are you going, big brother?” Isabel asks him.

“To Erwin,” Farlan answers before Levi has a chance to, looking up from his cards lazily. “Isn’t that right?”

Levi says nothing as he heads out the door, his steps weighed down by the heaviness in his head. It makes him drag his feet up the steps to Erwin’s door, and resent the surprised look on the man’s face ever so slightly as he walks in. When he feels Erwin reaching for his arm to turn him around, there’s a part of Levi that wants to pull away from the touch.

“What’s wrong?” Erwin asks him, his voice full of concern that makes Levi sigh.

“Nothing,” he lies and just like before, it’s sickeningly easy. “Does something need to be wrong for me to come here on a Sunday?”

“Of course not,” Erwin agrees at once, more gently this time. “I’m glad you did.”

Levi follows his usual route into the kitchen to get started on tea, stopping in his tracks when he sees the crateful of food on the table next to a ten kilo sack of potatoes. He looks back at Erwin who has followed him into the room, frowning at the cheerful look on the man’s face; it seems so out of touch with his own uneasiness.

“Perhaps you can help me find a place for these then,” he tells Levi and smiles. “Though I’d never want to force you to work on a Sunday.”

“What is all this?” Levi asks, lifting up a bag of split peas.

“I suppose you could call it the emergency reserve.”

“The what?” Levi asks now, turning to Erwin again, taking in his relaxed posture and wondering why, after all that’s happened, it doesn’t make him feel relieved.

“The emergency supplies,” Erwin repeats. “I’ve asked Marie if she’d be able to bring you food and things while you stay here, and I’m happy to say she has agreed, but it occurred to me there are too many things that can go wrong with the plan, too many things that can keep her from coming here and so...”

He spreads his arms at the food on the table for a few seconds before letting them fall back to his sides. Levi looks at him for a moment in a stunned silence before laying the bag of peas back onto the table. His mind seems empty, like it has suddenly decided that feeling and thinking nothing is better than feeling the dread of Erwin leaving, than thinking about that quiet loneliness that will soon fill these rooms.

“I’m not sure whether I should hide it all,” the man goes on, “considering the punishments against hoarding food. But then, I hardly expect anyone to inspect my apartment – certainly not for contraband, in any case.”

“I don’t want to see it,” Levi croaks, his throat suddenly dry.

He turns away quickly and walks into the sitting room, curling up on the sofa and listening to Erwin’s footsteps as he follows him. There’s a moment of hesitation before he takes a seat, lifting Levi’s legs onto his lap to make room for himself. Levi doesn’t speak as Erwin unties the laces of his boots and pulls them off, laying them down on the floor, holding Levi’s feet gently in his hands.

“Levi,” he whispers, but Levi doesn’t make a sound. “You know it won’t be long now before I—”

“Just fucking stop it,” Levi snaps without looking at Erwin. “I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear any of it.”

Suddenly as Levi lies there it all feels like too much: Farlan’s anger, Nanaba, Osterhaus, lying to Erwin, always missing Erwin, already missing him. He feels exhausted and spent, like he’s fought for days not to let things unravel just to have them fall apart right in front of him. The silence in the room seems to bristle, eager to drown Levi, anxious to make his thoughts and memories scream, until Erwin breaks it gently.

“I’ve made all the arrangements,” he says. “We can choose to pretend, if you prefer it. I’ll leave knowing that I’ve done all I can, in any case.”

Levi weighs his options; through his tiredness everything seems bleak, every conversation he imagines with Erwin ends up being about making room in the pantry, about typhus epidemics on the eastern front, about plans and secondary plans and emergency plans after that. It doesn’t seem fair that even this place should become a prison to Levi, especially now when it doesn’t have to.

“Today,” he whispers into the fabric of the sofa. “Just for today.”

“As you wish,” Erwin agrees, pulling Levi’s feet more firmly onto his lap and dancing his fingers across the soles, making Levi squirm and let out a chortling laugh.

“Stop it,” he commands the man, casting a glare at him and the affectionate smile playing on his lips.

Levi groans into the cushions as the man starts massaging his heels through his mended and patched up socks.

“You have very small feet for a man,” Erwin remarks quietly and Levi scoffs, feeling that shadow moving further still.

“You can’t honestly be surprised by that,” Levi counters, sighing as Erwin presses his thumb against a tight muscle on the sole of his foot and laughs.

“I’m not,” he admits. “I made that observation a long time ago.”

Levi clicks his tongue, rolling onto his back and folding his arms under his head. “You’ve been looking at my feet?”

“You were looking at mine,” Erwin defends himself.

“Just because you looked fucking strange without those boots on,” Levi insists. “Don’t try to make it something that it wasn’t.”

“Oh,” Erwin voices and sighs. “And here I thought there was something you liked about me.”

Levi kicks at the man’s thigh playfully before settling onto the sofa more comfortably, pushing the tips of his fingers under the waist of his trousers. “Shut up now. I’m having a nap.”

“Not a peep,” Erwin promises, picking up a book from the side table and beginning to read while Levi allows himself to doze off, sleeping soundly for the first time in days.

He wakes when Erwin suddenly shakes him, talking about a knock on the door and repeating his words when they don’t sink in. Levi sits up tiredly as Erwin crosses the room, pulling on his boots and standing up reluctantly, stretching his arms above his head before walking through the bedroom to listen in on the conversation, his ear pressed against the bathroom door. He can make out Erwin’s voice, along with another man’s; the words are calm, there’s no urgency or aggression and Levi relaxes a little, easing his hold on the razor he’s grabbed along the way.

When he hears the man entering and following Erwin through to the sitting room, Levi turns to wash his face, rubbing at the bags under his eyes and sighing before drying himself and walking out. He lingers at the bedroom door for a moment, peering out and observing the man now seated in an armchair; dark hair and a mousy little moustache, a patch of beard on his chin that gives the impression he’s trying to look older than he is. A uniform of an officer of the Wehrmacht – so not an SS bastard, this time. Erwin’s expression has grown serious. It

makes Levi wonder whether he should be Lukas, and the thought makes him cringe as he hesitates for another moment before pushing open the doors.

The movement catches Erwin's attention instantly, and something about the look on his face makes Levi wonder whether he forgot about him. "There you are," the man says, frowning. "Always so good at disappearing... Err... Yes, something to drink. Could you—"

"Tea or coffee?" Levi asks, ignoring the stranger's confusion and keeping his eyes on Erwin, who seems suddenly flustered.

"You have coffee?" the guest asks. "Real coffee?"

"Yes. Perhaps coffee then," Erwin agrees but seems to remember something. "Though in that case I suppose it's better if I make it. You should just... take a seat. Should I make you a cup of tea?"

Levi shakes his head and sits back down on the sofa, facing the stranger who keeps glancing at him like trying to figure out who he could possibly be. In the end Levi's surprised at how long it takes the man to ask him about it.

"I'm the housekeeper," he merely says, and it seems to raise more questions than it answers.

"Shouldn't you be making the coffee then?" he asks Levi now, making him click his tongue.

"I don't know how," Levi tells him. "It'd be a waste of coffee."

After this they fall quiet until Erwin returns with a tray; three cups and two pots, one for coffee and one for tea.

"I forgot you didn't want any," he says to Levi apologetically. "Should I take it back?"

"Well I'll drink it now that you made it," Levi tells him almost impatiently; there's something about Erwin's lack of composure that makes Levi feel nervous.

Erwin pours the tea and passes him his cup before getting to the coffee, pouring some for the officer and some for himself before leaning back on the sofa and throwing one of his legs over the other. Levi keeps glancing at him from the corner of his eye, looking for something calming in the steadiness of Erwin's hand that holds the saucer.

"I don't think your housekeeper should be here for this, Erwin," the officer says, his tone almost reprimanding. "I was hoping we could talk openly about things."

"It's perfectly alright, Nile," Erwin replies, stirring his drink slowly. "There are no secrets between us."

Levi feels a sting of guilt at the words, barely drowned out by the irritation at seeing the disapproval on the man's face. He seems to be expecting some kind of a further explanation, ending his staring with a heavy sigh when neither Erwin nor Levi provide him with one.

“I understand why you’re trying to make me uncomfortable, Erwin,” he says. “I still remember how we left things. I remember what I said.”

“I’m not trying to make you uncomfortable, Nile,” Erwin counters. “It’s hearing the truth that does that. It’s what has always caused you discomfort.”

“Alright,” the officer says, laying his cup back on the saucer though he’s just been about to take a sip. “I’ll admit it. You’re right. You were right all along. Is that what you want to hear?”

Erwin shakes his head. “I’m not demanding anything from you,” he tells the man, sipping at his coffee in silence until the officer lets out another heavy sigh.

“I’m sorry,” he says, staring into his cup. “That’s what I came here to say, so I might as well say it. I’m sorry for not listening to you, I’m sorry for my parting words, and I’m sorry for not coming to you sooner with all this.”

“Of course I accept your apology,” Erwin says at once, “but to tell you the truth I was never angry with you. I always found your reaction very understandable.”

“But you see,” Nile says, and it seems to Levi his eyes keep shifting back to him, “that’s the difference between us. There are so many things that you find understandable, so many things you approve of.”

“There are also many things I disapprove of, Nile,” Erwin argues. “I’m sure I don’t need to remind you.”

“No, you don’t,” the man tells Erwin, looking like a sudden shudder has run through his body. “You understand why I never believed you, don’t you?”

“But you’ve seen for yourself now,” Erwin states and Nile nods, laying his cup and saucer on the table.

“It seemed so outrageous, what you were suggesting was happening,” he tells Erwin quietly. “All those people, women, children... How could anyone believe that unless they had seen it for themselves?”

Levi can’t help clicking his tongue as he sips at his tea, drawing the officer’s attention but saying nothing.

“I never pictured you getting a housekeeper,” he suddenly says to Erwin, who laughs.

“Oh, it was rather a strange circumstance,” he replies, turning to look at Levi. “I think we’re well past that now, in any case.”

“I still clean your shitty apartment,” Levi reminds him. “Scrub your shitty toilet and do your shitty laundry—”

“Forgive me,” Erwin says warmly. “I never meant to overlook your efforts, Levi.”

Levi shrugs and drinks his tea as the officer stares at him, frowning for a moment before shaking his head.

"I don't understand you, Erwin," he says, sounding almost sad. "I don't understand you at all. Have you no hope for the future?"

"On the contrary," Erwin replies fervently, smiling and leaning forward on his seat. "I have all the hope for the future. Even now I believe humanity can recover from all the evil that has been done here."

"One would think you want to die," Nile goes on, not even bothering to hide the casual glance he sends Levi's way, "with all the unnecessary risks you take."

"There isn't a single part of me," Erwin starts, growing suddenly serious, "that regards this risk as unnecessary."

Nile turns to look at Levi again, frowning for a moment before shaking his head. "I always said you were more of a philosopher than a soldier," he tells Erwin. "You always asked too many questions."

"And you too few," Erwin replies.

"I don't know how children are raised where you come from," Nile says, lowering his voice, "but I was brought up to respect my elders, and not to question what I was told to do."

"Perhaps that is the real difference between us," Erwin says. "My parents always encouraged my questions. They taught me never to accept anything as truth until I had considered all sides to the argument."

"If we had all questioned everything, who could we have trusted then?" Nile argues. "For all of us it seemed the whole world was coming to an end. People were starving to death. Men couldn't find work to feed their families. What kind of a future could any of us have seen?"

"I understand what you're saying, Nile," Erwin says. "Many of you had nothing and Hitler promised you everything. It was a tempting offer – so tempting many never stopped to consider the price or if they did, deemed it reasonable since it didn't directly concern them."

"It's how they presented it," the man starts, something borderline desperate in his voice. "How they were getting rid of criminals and radicals and–"

Levi scoffs, suddenly so loudly it cuts off the man's words and makes him turn to him with a frown. He can feel his irritation growing into anger at the haughty look on the man's face.

"Is there something you wish to say?" he asks Levi sourly, making him shake his head. "So you're telling me you never did anything illegal in your life?"

"Not until you people made it illegal for me to exist," Levi growls. "To work, to eat, to have a roof over my head, to fuck whoever I fucking wanted to."

Levi can see the man physically flinching at the words and glance at Erwin, then try to mask it all by turning back to his coffee.

“How are Marie and the baby?” Erwin asks suddenly as if to change the subject. “Does the little one have a name yet?”

The discomfort vanishes from Nile’s face, replaced quickly by a dreamy smile. “We named her Sofie,” he tells Erwin, and it seems his eyes are growing misty. “She’s so beautiful, Erwin. The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m glad they gave you a leave to come see her,” Erwin tells him warmly.

“At least now if I die I will have seen her,” Nile agrees, turning his eyes up from his cup of coffee. “It’s bad out there, Erwin. Not many can hope to make it, but I’m glad we had this chance to reconcile.”

“It seems Marie was right.”

“She always is,” Nile says, uttering a laugh before growing serious again. “I won’t pretend to understand the choices you’ve made,” he says, glancing again at Levi. “Or the ones you continue to make.”

“And I don’t expect you to,” Erwin tells him, smiling. “There will always be much we disagree on. There always was.”

“The most important thing for me,” Nile goes on, “is that you know I take back what I said. Those words were spoken in anger, and I’ve regretted them many times since.”

“I in turn would like to apologise,” Erwin says, “for the lies I told you, and the secrets I made Marie keep from you. I know my involving her in my deception hurt you more than most of the things I mishandled then.”

Nile nods along and empties his cup, standing up suddenly and extending his hand to Erwin. “I’m sorry it has to be such a short visit,” he says as Erwin takes the hand in his.

“You have somewhere better to be,” Erwin replies, answering Nile’s nod with a smile.

Levi watches them as they simply stand there, hands stills clasped together as they look at each other, finally spreading their arms and falling into a brief embrace, from which they break looking noticeably emotional. Levi stays behind as Erwin walks Nile back to the front door and bids him goodbye, sending his regards to Marie along with him. When he finally returns to the sitting room, that warm smile is still on his lips, and Levi can’t help but marvel at the difference from just a few days ago.

“What a happy occurrence,” Erwin says, sitting down next to Levi with a contented sigh.

Levi knows better than to ask Erwin why it means so much to him to still be friends with such a person, saying instead, “So that was Marie’s husband.”

“Yes,” Erwin replies. “He contacted me a while ago, asking if we could meet while he was in town visiting Marie. The three of us were good friends back in Berlin. I met Nile very soon after I arrived.”

“Well,” Levi mutters, leaning against the armrest of the sofa, “you know I like Marie, but I’ve got to question her choices now.”

Erwin chuckles quietly, shifting closer to Levi and leaning into his ear. “You make me blush Levi, talking like that,” he whispers, and Levi clicks his tongue in response.

“It’s not much of a compliment if you ask me,” he counters, making Erwin laugh a bit more loudly.

“I had a feeling you two wouldn’t be fast friends,” he says. “What you have to understand is that Nile isn’t a bad person. I believe he genuinely thought he was doing the right thing.”

“It doesn’t make much of a difference to me,” Levi admits, staring at the tips of his boots. “I’m sure that’s what they’ll all be saying soon, that they just did what they were told. Trying to make someone else take responsibility for it.”

“I’m sure you’re right, but I have to believe it makes a difference, the intention behind the act – or lack thereof,” Erwin says; it starts to sound like his discussions with Farlan, and it makes Levi want to change the subject.

“You don’t have to tell me anything,” he starts, remembering Erwin’s promise from before. “I’m just wondering what happened between you two. The way you spoke with Marie about it sounded like it was pretty bad.”

“Yes. When Nile found out the truth he regarded my actions as a betrayal, and the fact I told Marie first and made her swear to keep my secret made matters considerably worse,” Erwin explains. “When we parted he told me that for the sake of the friendship we had he would not turn me in, but that he hoped the operation would fail, and that the failure would cost me my life.”

“Jeez,” Levi mutters, leaning his head against the backrest and staring up at the ceiling. “And you thought we wouldn’t be friends.”

Erwin laughs, only a little bit bitterly. “It’s good that we could reconcile things,” he says, “before it’s too late.”

Levi looks at Erwin from the corner of his eye, feeling a wave of dread at the words but saying nothing. There’s a smile still playing on the man’s lips; an easy expression, like another little bit of that pain from before has fallen away. While Levi watches, Erwin turns to him with a question.

“Will you stay the night?”

The words have become familiar to Levi, though sometimes Erwin asks that and sometimes he doesn’t. There’s still something tentative about it, like Erwin’s afraid Levi will take

offence and pull away, like he thinks it impolite not to pretend there's still some boundary between them. And just like all the times before, Levi knows he should decline and go back to Farlan and Isabel, but thinking about the tension in the apartment, the brewing resentment and his own exhaustion, he shrugs instead.

"Might as well," he states; despite their lack of enthusiasm, something about his own words makes a shiver of excitement shoot down Levi's spine. He stands up and stretches his arms above his head, feeling Erwin's hands suddenly on his waist.

"Would you like to?" he merely says, and Levi doesn't have to ask what he means. He leans his head against Erwin's chest.

"Go wash up," he whispers, feeling the hands tighten their hold for an instant before they disappear and Erwin passes him, walking through the bedroom and out of sight.

He follows Erwin slowly, listening to the soft splashing of water carrying in from the bathroom while he draws the curtains and pulls the counterpane off the bed, undressing without hurry and slipping between the sheets, marvelling at the leisure, at that Sunday feeling he has heard people talking about but has never really felt for himself. Erwin is naked when he comes in; Levi has barely enough time to catch the few drops of water running down Erwin's thigh before he has joined him in the bed.

Levi shuffles closer at once, leaning onto his arm as he reaches up to kiss Erwin; it's a thing he's still getting used to, the softness of Erwin's lips, the heat of his breath, the flash of impatience in his expression whenever Levi breaks that connection. He lets the man guide him on top of him, knowing this is how Erwin wants him: sitting back on his thighs as he looks down at his body, letting Erwin's gaze travel freely on his own. That want in Erwin's eyes never makes Levi feel uneasy now, and the freedom Erwin gives him roots him to the moment, loans courage to his hands as they tickle their way up Erwin's sides and make him chuckle.

"Careful there," he whispers, moving his fingers gently behind Levi's head and pulling him down into a kiss, deeper and more purposeful than the earlier ones they shared.

In that comfortable nakedness, the loudness of their bodies makes their mouths mute; they speak through touches, pushes and eager pulls that soon grow restless and demanding. And still Erwin never forgets what Levi has taught him, never crosses those borders on his skin even when they've both grown near mindless with want, even when to Levi they seem to grow blurrier by the second. He kisses his way down along Erwin's chest and abdomen, his thumb already teasing the tip of Erwin's cock, spreading that wetness over the swollen flesh.

"Hand me a pillow," Levi tells the man who does so quickly, lifting his hips so Levi can slide it in place under his arse.

He kisses the insides of Erwin's thighs as his legs fall open, sliding down onto his stomach on the bed, his own erection pressed firmly against the soft mattress. He breathes in the scent of sweat before tasting it, his mouth on Erwin's length moving almost too impatiently to follow his fingers between the man's buttocks. Levi pauses quickly to glance at Erwin, relieved to find the man's hand has already replaced his lips on his cock. When after a while Levi looks

up again in a wordless question, his thumb tracing that opening his tongue has made slick and tempting, Erwin nods enthusiastically.

Levi comes up on his elbow before spitting on his fingers, letting Erwin command him with his sighs and broken words as Levi watches him, eyes closing as his back arches, strong limbs tense and ready, relaxed and poised. Erwin pushes against his hand and groans; Levi's almost at the edge when he realises his hips are mimicking that movement, the soft, rolling back and forth that makes Erwin grit his teeth and hiss out a swear. There's something about being so close to release that makes Levi reconsider the tightness around his fingers, that makes him uneasy until his eyes lock with Erwin's as the man looks up, alerted by Levi's hesitation. There's worry behind that blue, the last feeling Levi would like to see piercing through that near-desperate hunger that has filled the man's features. Levi shifts his focus quickly back to Erwin and pushes in harder for that longing, making Erwin shudder and moan, staring at his face so intently that when his own pleasure peaks it takes him by surprise. Levi barely has time to recognise how unceremonious it is – a few wet blotches on the sheets and a half-suppressed grunt – when Erwin whispers “faster” and crashes over, coming up to almost sitting as his muscles tense before falling back down, panting loudly and muttering something under his breath, exhaling slowly when Levi pulls out his fingers.

“Are you alright?” he asks Levi who nods curtly before sitting up and leaving the bed.

He walks into the bathroom, grabbing the tin box from the cupboard before washing his hands at the sink, his eyes shifting nervously between the bar of soap and his reflection. His movements are rushed and impatient as he douses the washcloth in water and starts cleaning the mess off his body, frowning at the ugliness of the white against the dark of his hair. He looks up into the mirror again and sees Erwin standing at the door; not entering or leaving, just following Levi with his eyes without saying a word. Levi catches those stains on his chest and stomach, thinking back to what led to them and suddenly even the stickiness of his own skin is a mark of something else: of having been close, of having been valued, of having found pleasure with Erwin again.

“Come here,” Levi tells the man gently, getting another washcloth and cleaning Erwin's front as he runs his fingers into Levi's hair and mutters a thank you onto his forehead with a kiss.

While Erwin finishes washing himself, Levi pulls the dirty linen off the bed, eyes purposefully looking out that mark he left on the fabric before he throws them into the laundry basket and finishes changing the sheets. He climbs back under the covers after a glance at Erwin's wrist watch, stretching out his body and smiling at that smell of lavender that mixes with cigarette smoke when Erwin finally joins him. Levi watches him smoking, reaching out his finger and running the tip of it across that bump on Erwin's nose. The man turns to him with a smile but neither one of them speaks; whole in the silence, the peace, the presence of that nameless thing they are.

“You left your clothes in a pile on the bathroom floor again,” Levi finally scolds Erwin absently, finding his spot when Erwin extends his arm after putting out his cigarette.

“I'm sorry, I'll pick them up later,” Erwin promises, turning to Levi who shakes his head lazily.

“It’s alright,” he says and yawns. “I need to do some laundry anyway. I’ll just pick them up as I go.”

“Please don’t hurry out.” Erwin pulls Levi closer and mutters the words into his hair.

“I’ve got all day,” Levi tells him, rolling onto his stomach. “It’s only a little past noon.”

Erwin utters a laugh and sighs. “I must have lost track of time,” he says and Levi scoffs.

“It really didn’t take you that long, you know,” he remarks, though he knows he should hardly be the one to say anything about that.

“I’ve found it rarely does, with you,” Erwin replies, and Levi can’t help smiling at the way the edges of his ears turn pink. “I hope it’s not too disappointing.”

“I don’t care about that,” Levi tells him earnestly, leaning his chin against Erwin’s arm.

“I just thought you might have expected something different,” Erwin says, “from someone my age.”

The words remind Levi of his and Farlan’s conversation, and he chuckles quietly. “Farlan said something about that,” he remarks, making Erwin frown.

“My age?”

Levi grunts in agreement. “He called you an older gentleman,” he explains and grins. “He said you’ve got money and experience, and that’s how you can take care of me and show me a good time.”

Erwin’s expression remains blank for a few seconds before he bursts out laughing; a deep, rich sound, low and oddly comforting, like something Levi didn’t even realise was missing from that moment had suddenly fallen into place. It pulls at the corners of Levi’s mouth and makes him marvel at the pure joy in it that is now rushing out, making the room ring with a new kind of happiness; an incredible, incredible thing.

“Oh, it’s so unkind to laugh,” Erwin says breathlessly, stopping to cough. “Of course it’s not terribly uncommon, and I can see how it suits Farlan, but thinking of you like that...”

Erwin’s words get drowned out by another wave of laughter that turns quickly into more coughing. Levi smothers his own breathy chuckles by pressing his mouth firmly against Erwin’s arm, watching as small tears pool at the corners of the man’s eyes. When he finally catches his breath Erwin wipes them away, settling back down on the bed and pulling Levi closer to place a kiss on top of his head.

“I’m curious,” he says, still smiling. “What did you say to that?”

“Nothing much,” Levi tells him. “Just that I never even really thought about it.”

“No, I can’t imagine you would,” Erwin agrees, drawing a deep breath and sighing.

“It did make me wonder for a minute there,” Levi admits, the words coming out so easily now. “It made me think of this man I knew back in Berlin. He was about your age, I think, if not a few years older.”

“Did you two have an affair?”

Levi snorts. “I wouldn’t exactly call it that,” he says. “I saw him more often than once – I’m not sure that qualifies as an affair.”

“I see,” Erwin responds, his fingers stroking Levi’s back lazily.

“He wasn’t bad,” Levi reminisces, not sure why it feels so good to be telling Erwin all this now. “He helped me with my false papers – didn’t even ask anything in return. His wife was some sort of a rich Jewish heiress, I think. The last I heard they were planning on leaving for America.”

“But he didn’t wow you with his money and experience?”

Levi cackles and shakes his head. “Certainly not with the money,” he says, “though I’m not so sure about the experience. I was a lot younger when I knew him, and there were some things we did that I had never done with anyone before, so I suppose you could say he taught me a thing or two.”

“So he wasn’t your first?” Erwin asks, and Levi shakes his head again.

“A couple of years before that my uncle made me go to a dance where I met a girl about my age. We didn’t talk much but we found our way to an alley behind the building and got busy,” Levi tells, chuckling at the memory. “It was a fucking disaster. She was a lot taller than me so I had to stand on an old crate to be able to reach the... Well, you know.”

Erwin laughs more loudly again. “I can only imagine,” he says and Levi scoffs.

“I don’t know who it was worse for, me or her,” he admits. “After that I met a few men, but you know how it was, with everyone scared shitless of being found out. Just a few gropes in the dark, and I can barely remember it now.”

Erwin agrees in a mumble. “There were times when it seemed like a risk worth taking,” he says, “though mostly I’d either go without or find safer ways to do it.”

“With women?” Levi asks, and Erwin nods.

“I suppose it’s my luck I’ve never been strongly partial to either,” he muses. “Or rather that I’ve been partial to both.”

“I wondered if you and Marie ever—”

“No,” Erwin tells him, something wistful about his smile. “No, we never did. It was a line we wouldn’t cross, and I suppose I’m grateful for that decision now.”

Levi falls quiet, thinking about the question he'd really like to ask: has Erwin had this with someone before, had something like what they have? He quickly imagines Erwin with another person, spending quiet Sundays in bed, sharing stories of their lives; it's a strange thought, and the Erwin he imagines isn't the same man as the one lying next to him in the bed. He's barely made the decision to keep the question to himself when Erwin starts answering it.

"Years ago, during my days in the military in England, I had a brief affair with one of my fellow soldiers," he tells Levi quietly. "It was the first time I had really felt something for another person. I remember thinking there was something so special about that feeling, something almost sacred."

"What happened?" Levi asks, realising this must be what Darlett talked about.

"The affair was discovered, of course," Erwin explains, a sudden sadness creeping into his voice. "In my case the matter was all but swept under the rug due to my position. His social standing was less fortunate, however, and he was relieved of his duties."

"You still blame yourself," Levi observes, and Erwin nods.

"Even now I can't say which one of us initiated it," he says, "but understanding the class difference between us I should have known better than to indulge those feelings – both his and my own. I always knew should we fail to keep it secret, he would have to suffer far worse consequences than I would."

"It can make you do stupid things," Levi mutters. "Being in love."

Erwin falls quiet for a while. "It seems much the same to me now as what I had with Marie," he finally says. "At the time I certainly thought I was in love with him, just like I thought I was in love with her."

"But you don't think that now," Levi says, barely having the courage to meet Erwin's gaze.

"No," Erwin whispers, reaching out to brush his knuckles against Levi's cheek. "I don't think that now."

And somehow Levi knows it's as close as they'll ever get to saying it.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- sexual content

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

The next chapter is going to be a special one and so I will need to take a week longer to finish so the deadline is on 4 June. Hopefully you enjoy this one!

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

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Levi wakes to Erwin pulling him closer in his sleep; he fights with the heavy lids of his eyes for a moment, realising through his drowsiness that he's still not used to it, the thick darkness drawn over the room by the new curtains. It's warm in the bed, so calm and comfortable that Levi doesn't want to leave even though he needs to take a piss. Instead he takes Erwin's hand in his own and shuffles closer until he can feel Erwin's breathing tickling his left ear; he wonders what time it is but absent-mindedly, as if it were still Sunday morning and neither of them had anywhere to be but here.

Levi glances back at the man's face, peaceful in sleep, and the sight of it makes the doubts in his mind grow into questions: how can it have come to this? how can someone like Erwin want someone like Levi in his bed, someone small and ugly like him? how can his luck have turned so drastically for this one thing, this one thing that seems suddenly to mean more than all the rest of it combined? It defies all the logic Levi's life has ever held, the soft puffs of Erwin's breathing in his ear, Erwin's arms around him, the man's morning hardness that Levi can feel against his thigh.

He lingers until the pressure on his bladder mixes with that nagging idleness and makes him get out of bed, and though he tries his best not to wake Erwin, the man follows Levi into the bathroom while he's washing his hands and running his fingers over the coarse stubble on his cheeks.

"Loan me your razor again?" Levi says to Erwin who grunts a reply from the toilet seat. "And wash your hands when you're done."

Levi catches Erwin giving him an affectionate glance and a low hum of a response before he walks out to the washstand and takes out the shaving supplies, returning to the bathroom and the mirror that's not too high on the wall for him to use.

Erwin waits for his turn patiently, shaving his own face in his shirt sleeves while Levi's getting dressed; he catches the man's smile as he grumbles about the lack of clean underwear.

"That reminds me," Erwin suddenly says, leaving the room with half of his face still coated in foam; when he returns he has a large brown suitcase with him.

"A bit early to pack your things, don't you think?" Levi asks him, regretting his words when he feels the flutter of anxiety in his chest and catches a hint of the same on Erwin's face.

"It's for you," he explains quickly and returns to the washstand as Levi opens the suitcase to find an assortment of sloppily folded clothes. "I thought you might be in need of something warm for the winter."

It's only then that Levi realises the garments are all different sizes, ranging from things that look small enough for Isabel to shirts and trousers that would no doubt be too long from their sleeves and legs for Levi but would fit Farlan near perfectly. It's a thing they've been worried about again since the weather has grown colder, and Levi knows Farlan has spent several evenings busily mending the holes in their existing winter clothes.

"I'm afraid they're rather a mismatched bunch," Erwin says apologetically as he clears the patch of skin above his upper lip, "but they should help keep the cold away, in any case."

Levi clicks his tongue. "You don't seriously think any of us would care about what's in style at this point," he tells the man, closing the suitcase and placing it at the foot of the bed. "They're just what we need."

"I'm glad to hear it," Erwin replies, rinsing the razor after one last long stroke along his cheek, cleaning his face and drying it before turning to Levi. "I've noticed you don't like the cold."

"It's nothing I'm not used to," Levi says. "Less of a problem around you though, the way you sweat."

Erwin utters a quiet laugh. "There's seldom any need for hot water bottles in my bed."

Levi grunts a reply as he gets to his feet and lets Erwin follow him into the kitchen where they have a simple breakfast of tea and bread before he takes his leave, stopping once more at the door to let Erwin pull him closer.

"Are you sure there's nothing more you need?" the man asks him, his hands on Levi's forearms as Levi holds the usual paper bag of groceries. "Money? Some more food?"

Levi shakes his head. "Stop worrying so much," he tells Erwin near sullenly, making the man laugh and apologise.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he whispers, kissing Levi on the lips, on his forehead, Levi's face between his hands as he presses closer.

The affection is almost enough to keep Levi warm as he walks through the city, his steps slowed down by the weight of the suitcase as he hauls it up the stairs and into the apartment.

He carries it into the kitchen where Isabel is still in her bed, awake and alert but still in her nightwear, her hair in tangles above the quilt she's wrapped around herself for warmth. Nanaba is lighting a fire in the stove, rubbing her hands together as the flames begin eating at the pieces of wood; her presence still takes Levi a little by surprise.

"Is Farlan not up yet?" Levi asks them quietly as he lays the bag on the kitchen table, interrupting their answers by coughing loudly enough for the noise to carry through the thin walls over to Frau Schultz's apartment.

"I'm not sure he slept all night," Nanaba tells him as Isabel shakes her head. "I saw a light on in the room in the early hours still."

Levi glances at the bedroom door as he shrugs out of his coat, letting Isabel reach over and pull the suitcase onto her legs.

"What's in it, big brother?" she asks him excitedly, fingers already fiddling with the clasps; even Nanaba looks curious.

"Just some warmer clothes," Levi explains briefly, walking quietly up to the door to listen for a few seconds and to wonder whether he should make sure Farlan is really sleeping; just as he has decided against it, the door flies open and the man steps into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes and casting a glare in Levi's direction.

"You're awake," Nanaba whispers rather unnecessarily and Farlan grunts sullenly.

"Woken up by that diabolical coughing," he mutters loudly enough for Levi to hear as he takes a seat at the kitchen table and lights a cigarette; the smell reminds Levi instantly of Erwin.

"I brought some food," Levi says, trying to drown the hesitation in his voice under a casual tone. "It's not much but it saves you from lining up to the shops all day."

"Because it would be my responsibility, of course," Farlan counters, pulling the bag of groceries across the table and peering inside it as Levi sighs. "Then again, it's probably better that I do it – since this is what you bring home."

"It's all Erwin had," Levi tells the man quietly. "He gave us some clothes."

Hearing these words, Farlan abandons the groceries and his eyes move to the suitcase, narrowing as he gets up and gestures for Isabel to move aside. He teases open the clasps and attacks the garments inside it, pushing Isabel's hands away as she reaches over to grab the woolly sweater he holds up for inspection; it's a grey knit, slightly worn with the odd bit of lint on the sleeves, and it makes Farlan crinkle his nose as he lets some ashes from his cigarette fall onto an empty plate.

"Give me it!" Isabel exclaims and rips the sweater out of the man's hands. "It's not even your size! Erwin's giving it to me!"

“Have it then,” he tells her sourly, turning to inspect a pair of thick woolly socks and taking a long drag off his cigarette.

“He said they’re nothing special,” Levi comments from the table, feeling a sting of sadness for Erwin’s sake for Farlan’s reaction, “but they’ll save us the trouble of spending money on that stuff.”

“I suppose,” Farlan agrees with a sigh, addressing his next words to Nanaba. “You’re welcome to any of these, if you want.”

She hesitates for a moment – Levi can see her glancing at the torn sleeve of her shirt – before crossing the room and crouching down to inspect the clothes, from which she chooses one sweater and one pair of men’s trousers.

“I’ll give these back when I leave,” she says, “but for now I would like to wear something else – just while I clean the ones I’ve had on.”

“You can keep them for all I care.”

Levi watches as Nanaba’s expression grows serious and angry, but when she speaks her voice is surprisingly patient.

“Farlan,” she whispers, “from what you say I get the feeling you don’t realise how lucky you are. Getting new clothes like this...” She pauses to shake her head. “The things I’m wearing are the only thing I own now. Last spring I took them off one of my countrymen, who had been shot dead by one of your countrymen. That’s what we’ve had to resort to – robbing the corpses of our fallen comrades. I wish you stopped to consider your words for a moment.”

For half a minute Farlan looks even sulkier than before but just as something starts to shift on his features, the sirens start their wailing in the distance and they all stand up, muscles trained by the routine of it; when Nanaba stays seated they all turn to look at her.

“Oh God,” Farlan mutters quietly, voicing the realisation as he puts out his smoke. “You can’t come with us.”

“It’s fine,” Nanaba assures them, taking Isabel’s hand when she reaches out. “It won’t be the first air raid that I’ve lived through.”

“We need to go,” Levi reminds them as the rumble of footsteps starts in the stairwell and they follow him, though reluctantly, nodding their wordless goodbyes to the woman at the kitchen door.

In the basement they huddle together with Frau Gernhardt and her children. Levi is relieved to find her manner towards them hasn’t changed since she found out about her husband’s death, ever more so when he catches the familiar yet unpleasant sight of Böhmer sitting by Frau Niemeyer in the corner by the door. Their eyes meet briefly before Levi turns back to Frau Gernhardt, trying not to pay attention to the man loudly explaining his presence in their basement to Frau Schultz.

“Did I mention we’ve finally figured out what to do with Kurt?” Levi says, nodding to Isabel who looks absent-minded as she entertains Bruno and Hanna.

“My aunt has finally decided to leave Berlin,” Farlan jumps in to explain the details of the lie they’ve constructed together earlier. “She’s moving to the country and has kindly agreed to take Kurt in as well.”

“I’m of course sad to see him go,” Frau Gernhardt says, taking a small break to remember the right pronoun, “but also more than a little relieved. I’m sure he’ll be much safer there than in the city.”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” Levi agrees, bursting into loud coughing as Farlan nods along. “We can’t go with him of course, but I feel like it’s the right thing to do.”

“I’ve been thinking we might have a bon voyage party on New Year’s Eve,” Farlan suddenly says and Levi frowns.

“You have?” he asks the man, feeling a sting of annoyance at the curt nod he gets as a reply; Farlan should know better than to keep something like this from him, or at the very least better than to mention it for the first time in front of Frau Gernhardt.

“It might lift everyone’s spirits some,” Farlan goes on and smiles, an expression Frau Gernhardt mimics quickly.

“Oh but doesn’t that sound lovely!” she nearly exclaims, tying Bruno’s shoelace but keeping her eyes on Farlan. “I think you’re right. It might be just what everyone needs.”

The words make Farlan pleased to the point of looking smug until Böhmer’s voice carries over the crowd, calling out for him and Levi both. They turn to the man at once and Levi shudders at the tone of his voice though he barely hears the words from more coughing.

“I noticed you boys aren’t wearing your armbands,” he points out, and it’s only then that Levi notices the black-and-red strip of fabric over his left forearm, the words *Deutscher Volkssturm Wehrmacht* screaming out from between two eagles. “What’s the matter? Aren’t you proud to serve your country?”

“We’ve not gotten ours yet,” Levi answers without missing a beat, hoping that Böhmer doesn’t know as much as he seems to. “Something wrong with the line of supply, and you know Levi four is always the bottom of the pack.”

Böhmer sneers quietly. “Has your friend the Sturmbannführer wondered about that?”

“Not especially,” Levi replies, shrugging. “Why do you ask?”

“So he is your friend,” the man continues, and Levi can tell everyone in the basement is hanging on to every word. “Not just a man you work for.”

“These days I don’t see much of a difference between the two,” Levi says, trying to sound indifferent. “Anyone who’s willing to pay me for an honest day’s work and help me keep food on the table and a roof over my head is a friend in my book.”

Böhmer's eyes narrow as he considers the words. "I can imagine for you it's easy to confuse the two," he finally says, leaving behind a silence that even Hanna and Bruno seem hesitant to break.

Levi feels his heart hacking away at his chest as he pushes himself to his feet, coughing and clearing his throat as he stares across the room at Böhmer, trying not let his apprehension show on his face. "Is there something you're trying to say?" he asks the man who turns his eyes away first.

"Not especially," Böhmer says and shrugs, throwing Levi's own words back at him. "Why do you ask?"

"Sounds to me like you're trying to imply something," Levi goes on, feeling suddenly exhausted with the pretence as he takes a step toward Böhmer, "and I think now's the time for you to reconsider what you let out of your piece of shit mouth."

Böhmer glances around himself for a few seconds, raising his hands defensively and feigning a hint of surprise as he sees the discomfort on all their faces. "I assure you Herr Weller, I didn't mean any offense," he tries to assure Levi now. "I just think you're very fortunate in your friendship with the Sturmbannführer, that's all."

Levi keeps meeting Böhmer's eyes as he coughs onto his forearm. "Alright then," he finally says, sitting down slowly and cringing at the apprehensive looks on Hanna and Bruno's faces.

The incident keeps all their voices hushed and their expressions tense until the sirens blare out again and they're free to join the others in moaning about the false alarm as they climb back up to their apartment where Isabel rushes to hug Nanaba while Levi turns to Farlan.

"What was all that about a party?" he asks, trying to keep his tone civil despite the irritation he feels.

Farlan sighs. "I just thought it would be fun," he says. "Besides, it wouldn't be the worst idea to host a party right before we go."

"How do you figure that?"

"Just think about it," Farlan starts to explain, sitting down at the table. "All we have to do is listen to one American song and serve up a little bit of something that makes it seem like we've been hoarding food and by the time we don't come back from supposedly taking Kurt to my aunt's house in the country, everyone will think one of the others turned us in to the Gestapo."

Levi considers the plan for a moment before nodding, though a painful thought pierces through: Erwin's last night in Dresden. Pushing it firmly to the back of his mind Levi says, "That might buy us some time before anyone starts to miss us."

"Exactly," Farlan says. "I thought that was the whole idea."

“It is,” Levi agrees, feeling relieved when Farlan answers his flash of a smile with the same before turning again to the suitcase to hold up a forest green sweater against his chest, starting to test the length of the sleeves only when he catches Levi looking at him.

Despite the improvement in Farlan’s mood and the calm and pleasant day they all spend together, the man still refuses Levi’s company when he leaves to do the shopping the following morning. Isabel leaves with him, encouraged by Levi to visit Frau Gernhardt to keep up the appearance that everything is exactly as it was before and that Isabel has nothing or no one at home to keep her busy better than the company of Hanna and Bruno. It’s only when they’re both gone and Levi walks back to the kitchen that he fully realises he’s not alone but in the company of Nanaba who is sitting at the kitchen table, playing klondike and drinking tea.

“How are you holding up?” he thinks to ask her, surveying the bruises on her face which are quickly turning an ugly shade of yellowish green.

“Much better now, thank you,” she says and smiles as Levi joins her at the table. “It’s strange how much being around good people can help.”

Levi agrees in a quiet hum, reaching for the teapot and pouring himself a cup. “Sorry about all this between me and Farlan,” he mutters, but she shakes her head before he can continue.

“At first I thought you two used to be lovers, with the way you fight,” she tells him, chuckling quietly. “He corrected my mistake soon enough.”

“No doubt.”

“You care about each other very much,” Nanaba says, reshuffling the deck of cards. “It is very clear from the way you are around each other – even from the arguing.”

Levi sighs. “I don’t like lying to them,” he confesses in a whisper, “but I guess it is what it is.”

“That is true,” she says. “I am fortunate in having someone I don’t need to lie to.”

Levi nods along with her words and sips at his tea, thinking back to that night which now seems to have happened a lifetime ago. It feels to him as though her presence has brought it all back into focus, the fear, the anger, and above all Darlett’s promise of assistance. He can feel his brows pulling into a curious frown as he looks at Nanaba and thinks again of the intention that made him offer her shelter.

“Say, Nanaba,” he starts and she looks up from her cards with a friendly smile. “Have you ever killed anyone?”

Her mouth turns into a tight line as she presses her lips together to keep from laughing out loud. “I’m sorry,” she finally whispers when she manages to speak again. “Such a silly question.”

Levi utters a quiet laugh too. "I guess it was," he agrees, remembering to cough again.

"You are thinking of killing someone?" she asks him back, her expression still equally pleasant, and Levi wonders whether he should find the conversation more than a little disturbing.

"Err... Yes," he finally says, frowning as she shakes her head.

"It is always more difficult when you need to plan," she muses, laying the cards back on the table. "Especially if you don't want to get caught."

"I'd prefer not getting caught," Levi admits readily, drinking his tea. "Have you ever done something like that?"

Nanaba considers the question for a moment before nodding and saying, "I have done it, yes. But I only did it twice."

"Can you tell me how?" Levi asks at once. "Anything helpful?"

"Have you ever gone hunting?" she asks him back, nodding when he tells her about his and Erwin's target practice. "Well, it is like that. You have to know what kind of a beast you're tracking, and how to bring it down."

"So I should find out things about him?"

The woman nods again. "What kind of a weapon are you going to use?"

"A rifle with a scope," Levi explains and Nanaba cringes a little.

"See, I used a knife both times," she tells him, placing a three of diamonds over a four of spades. "Much easier to carry around, much more difficult for others to notice. If you use a rifle you need to know exactly where your target will be and when or you lose the advantage."

Levi swears under his breath and wonders how he never thought of that before. The only other mission where he used the rifle was planned by Erwin from start to finish; he told Levi where to go and what to do once he got there, even made sure the rifle was in place without Levi having to worry about a thing. In the heat of his anger it was easy and satisfying for Levi to imagine killing Osterhaus, putting a bullet in his brain through one of those squinty little eyes of his, and it's only now that he starts to think that Levi realises it will all be easier said than done.

"My first advice is simple," Nanaba tells him. "Know your enemy. Once you do, it will be much easier for you to be one step ahead of him."

Levi drinks his tea and nods though he's still not sure how to follow this instruction. There's very little Levi knows about Osterhaus other than his name and rank and the fact he's a Nazi piece of shit who deserves to have all his teeth ripped out for what he's done to Erwin – none of it very helpful information. To trail the man's steps like a hunter Levi would have to venture back into the Albertstadt; not a wise choice for an outing, and it doesn't seem to Levi

like one he would return from, certainly not without a Volkssturm armband sewn to his sleeve.

“I’m sorry I can’t do more to help you,” Nanaba says, looking and sounding genuinely apologetic. “Maybe Erwin could–”

“No,” Levi interrupts her. “I don’t want Erwin to know about this. It’s... personal.”

Nanaba cocks her head thoughtfully. “I think there should always be some secrets between lovers,” she muses, and Levi flinches at the word. “Knowing everything about someone makes it... how do you say... boring.”

Levi scoffs and focuses on his tea, not wanting to tell her that the thought of knowing everything about Erwin is just about the most exciting thing his simple mind can conjure up; she seems to guess without him speaking, and chuckles quietly.

“But perhaps you have had enough excitement,” she says, smiling kindly and making Levi shrug.

“Maybe,” he whispers. “You’re not done with it then?”

She shakes her head at once. “Ah, no,” she tells him. “In my little village I always wanted adventure. Nothing ever happened, nothing ever changed and I yearned for a revolution, a fight for a good cause.”

“Is that what you got?”

Her expression grows mournful, but only slightly so. “Not quite,” she admits, “but I will die knowing I did the right thing, that I stood up and spat in the face of the fascist oppressor – and I’ll die more peacefully for that.”

Levi nods along and finds himself in those words too, though he can’t say he ever wished for any of this, even when he was younger and the walls of Kenny’s little shop seemed to close in on him on Friday nights as he sat at the register, counting coins and handing out this and that from the odd assortment of goods they carried. He tries to think back and wonders whether he would have joined a revolt against the Nazi government had there ever been one. Kenny had that fighting spirit, rushing out on Kristallnacht like a blind fool; perhaps if he hadn’t they would have left together, run from Berlin, and who knows where they would have ended up then.

They have an early dinner when Farlan and Isabel return, exchanging a few words here and there before Nanaba starts teaching Isabel and Farlan more French and Levi falls silent, listening to the words that sound both strange and pleasant to his ears. As he’s about to leave the table Farlan suddenly stops him, telling him to ask Erwin about the armbands. Levi would scarcely have needed the reminder; it’s the first thing he brings up when he finally sits down for tea with the man.

“I’m sorry.” Levi isn’t surprised these are the first words Erwin says. “I was supposed to take care of the matter but I got... distracted.”

Levi nods. “Doesn’t seem like there’s too much harm done – for now at least,” he tries to assure the man whose guilt seems to budge not a smidge.

“How is Farlan handling all this?” Erwin suddenly asks. “He seems to grow more nervous after every day you two spend here.”

“He wishes we could just go into hiding already,” Levi says and shrugs. “I don’t think he was ever meant to live like this. I’m not sure he has the stomach for it.”

“He may surprise us all yet,” Erwin muses, not quite managing to convince Levi.

Farlan’s hidden reserves of courage don’t manifest the following day when Levi returns to Erwin’s apartment with him early in the morning. By the time they cross the threshold and Levi closes the door soundlessly behind them, Farlan seems ready to lose his breakfast and Levi is surprised when he manages to walk over to the sofa unassisted. The worried look on Erwin’s face stands in stark contrast with his earlier words as he looks at Farlan who’s wrapping himself in the quilt that Levi has passed to him. He’s asleep by the time Erwin leaves and gone from the sofa when Levi stops refolding Erwin’s clothes and linens some thirty minutes later. Levi finds him curled up on the floor of the pantry with the quilt and a pillow, eyes closed and knees drawn to his chest but, it seems to Levi, still awake. He knows better than to disturb him and leaves him be, returning to the sitting room and taking his usual place on the sofa.

The lack of distractions brings his mind back to Osterhaus and the problems regarding the mission which Levi now finds himself planning on his own. It only occurs to him now how much help even Erwin must have had, how many secret somebodies he must have had moving around the city on his orders, like pieces on a chessboard. If even Erwin couldn’t manage all the missions by himself, how is Levi supposed to plan this and to carry it out? Darlett would give him the rifle, sure, but that’s as far as Levi wants him involved in the first place. Even if he could ask Darlett to take the rifle where Levi needs it, he’d still need to name the place and time, neither of which seems like something Levi can find out any time soon.

Though he feels like groaning, Levi merely sighs as he leans his head against the backrest of the sofa and stares at the ceiling, wondering whether it really means so much, killing Osterhaus, getting vengeance for Erwin, but even in the calmness of the moment the thought of the man escaping without due punishment makes Levi’s insides twist with rage. He tries to think of what Erwin would do, but it’s no good; Erwin is smart, he has years of training and experience, and to even imagine that Levi could ever come close to matching him in ingenuity is absolutely ludicrous. Levi moves his eyes from the ceiling slowly and they focus on the secretaire, the broken lock still catching his attention and reminding him of the way Lilian hobbled across the room on her broken heel.

He pushes quickly to his feet and walks over to the desk, stopping to listen for Farlan before pulling open the topmost drawer. It’s not an inconceivable thought, that Erwin’s would have written something down about Osterhaus and that he would have written it in a language that Levi can understand: an address, maybe, or something else personal, something to get Levi

started on tracking the bastard. He goes through the piles carefully, eyes scanning for anything starting with O, anything with a familiar street name scribbled into the corner, but when the sirens suddenly interrupt his spying, the only thing of any interest Levi has been able to find is an invitation for Erwin to attend a gala concert on December 23rd.

He goes back to Farlan in the pantry; the man has sat up on the floor and is leaning against the lower shelves, looking up at Levi only when he sits down next to him after closing the door. The sirens scream and even after all the false alarms Levi can feel his heart hammering in his chest as he listens to their anxious howling. He meets Farlan's gaze and takes his hand in his without saying a word. Farlan gives him a crooked little smile that dies after a second or two, and when the sirens call out again he falls back down on the floor like a corpse, worn out from the fear.

Levi is glad when Erwin hands him their armbands when they return the following morning, even if looking down at the swastikas that will soon decorate his coat makes Levi shudder. When Erwin notices it he brushes his knuckles against Levi's cheek and smiles at him, worried and encouraging at the same time. Levi feels a sting of guilt for going through Erwin's things and leaves the secretaire alone this time.

Once they've returned to their home, Levi spends the evening sewing the armbands onto their coats, Farlan's hands being too unsteady for the task. The only thing that makes Levi feel better about it is Nanaba who reminds him once the war is over he can take off the armband and use it to wipe his arse, a statement that makes Levi snort with laughter.

"Though in truth those fascist pigs are not even worth your shit," she tells him.

"At least it would get my point across," Levi mutters, focusing again on the stitches as he pricks his thumb with the needle.

The armband makes Levi feel only marginally better when he enters the area of the Albertstadt on Friday afternoon, feeling somewhere beneath the cold and the dread like it'll all prove to be for nothing in the end. It's hard to deny that it's a long shot, catching Osterhaus as he's leaving the barracks, but it seems to Levi even less likely that he'd manage to follow the man through the city without getting noticed and recognised. It's all he has to go on, and he knows that anger inside him will never let him be if he gives up without trying at least something and he spends several hours by walking around the area, never straying so far that he can't see the building.

When the bells of St Martin's church have just rung out five times, Levi finally spots him by some stroke of luck that sends his heart racing in his chest. His pace speeds up for a moment until he thinks to slow down to keep his distance, following the man across a street and over to another one, only to watch him getting into a car and driving away. Levi stands glued to the spot for a moment before he can move again and turn on his heels to get away from the uniforms and the site of his failure as fast as he can.

He spends the weekend in the apartment mulling over his defeat, burying his plan in silence to keep from bringing more tension into the apartment. During the days there are even moments when he manages to forget the bitterness he feels about it all, when he listens to Farlan and Nanaba arguing about politics in hushed voices. She has a way of explaining things so they make sense to Levi, without long, fancy words and a way of talking Levi assumes people get when they go to pretentious universities. Besides, it seems they see eye to eye on these things, about who does most of the work in the world and who owns most of the wealth, and how to bring more balance into that divide.

He's still in a sour mood when he goes to Erwin's on Tuesday, ever more so when a cold wind starts tugging on the hem of his coat and pushing under his collar, making him shiver and swear under his breath. When the man opens the door he walks straight into the bathroom to draw himself a bath, folding all of his clothes neatly on the bed while the water runs and letting out a loud groan when he finally sinks into the warmth. Erwin follows him in with the usual tray of tea, laying it down on the floor as he takes a seat on the little stool by the tub.

"Biscuit?" he asks cheerfully, holding up a plate.

Levi leans over the side of the tub and looks down at the assortment on the plain white porcelain; wheels and birds and bits Levi can still recognise used to be swastikas, though Erwin has taken care to break them all in two, making them look like strange angular question marks without their dots. He dries his hands quickly and picks up his cup of tea while Erwin pops one of the biscuits into his mouth, smiling happily.

"You should take some home with you when you go," the man says. "I'm sure Isabel and Farlan would love them."

Levi grunts, chewing on the biscuit and stirring his tea, his skin coming up to goosebumps wherever it's not submerged in the hot water. "What's gotten you in such a great mood?" he asks Erwin whose smile only widens at the question.

"I didn't realise it was out of the ordinary," he says, "but now that you mention it I suppose I am feeling rather good."

"Well, at least one of us is," Levi mutters, shaking his head when Erwin doesn't hear. "What's the occasion?"

"Well, I don't know," Erwin muses, sipping at his tea. "I saw Marie and little Sofie yesterday. They are both in very good health."

"Glad to hear it," Levi tells him, reaching for another biscuit – he's not had anything so sweet in years.

"And I suppose..." Erwin starts, stopping to scoff quietly. "Well, it's coming on Christmas now."

Levi agrees in a low, unenthusiastic hum that makes Erwin laugh.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think,” he says. “What did you celebrate? Before all this?”

“My birthday,” Levi replies, biting into the biscuit. “When my uncle would remember.”

The words make him think back to those times, how every day with Kenny was more or less exactly like the previous one no matter what the occasion. Sometimes he’d let Levi take a bar of chocolate from the stock, though he never failed to remind him it was money out of his pocket. The birthday Levi remembers most clearly even now was his thirteenth; he’d never seen his uncle looking so ill at ease before, sitting Levi down at the kitchen table and muttering to him about laws and the Torah and who knows what while Levi held his tongue not to ask him if he’d been drinking more than usual. The gift then was special too: a pair of shoes made out of good brown leather, not second-hand either like most of the clothes and things Kenny got him. Levi wore them for several years, not telling Kenny when they started to get tight around the toes.

“When is your birthday?” Erwin asks, smiling when Levi tells him. “You could have told me sooner.”

“Why?” Levi asks, reaching for a third biscuit and shoving it into his mouth whole. “What difference would that have made?”

“It would have left me with more time to get you a present,” Erwin explains, making Levi snort.

“Don’t bother,” he says, not sure whether the heat on his cheeks is caused by the tea and bath or something else. “Unless you can get more of these biscuits.”

Erwin laughs again, eating one of the broken swastikas that Levi has left untouched. “Have you three got plans? I assume you’ve gotten into the habit of doing something for Christmas.”

“Just the usual, probably,” Levi tells him. “Farlan will moan about not having his gugelhupfs and Christmas trees while cooking us something a bit special – last year it was ham with gravy, peas, carrots and potatoes, and a loaf of bread. He even managed a dessert.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad at all,” Erwin comments while Levi crosses his legs underwater and leans his arms against the side of the tub.

“What about you?”

The man sighs heavily. “By myself, as per usual,” he says. “I should be used to it by now.”

“Has to be better than with your Nazi friends though,” Levi remarks and Erwin hurries to agree.

“I suppose there’s the silver lining,” he says, sighing again, “though I am attending a gala concert at the Semperoper on the 23rd.”

Levi remembers the invite and scoffs. “So all the Nazis still left in Dresden will get together and drink champagne and try to pretend like by next Christmas they won’t all be stuck in

some prisoner-of-war camp?”

“More or less,” Erwin admits, laughing joylessly. “I fear the company will ruin the music.”

A thought occurs to Levi suddenly, fuelled by his own words, and he glances at Erwin before asking, “Will he be there?”

For a moment Levi reads Erwin’s silence to mean the man hasn’t caught his meaning, until he finally says, “Yes, it would appear so.”

Levi does his best to look indifferent though his hands are nearly shaking from a sudden burst of excitement. He sucks at his teeth for a moment before emptying his cup of tea.

“Is it one of those la-di-da things where everyone’s competing in who spent the most money on something they’ll only wear once?” he asks Erwin, who laughs.

“Yes,” he admits. “Very much so.”

Levi snatches the last biscuit off the plate and eats it slowly, savouring the sugary flavour before speaking. “I guess I ought to come over before you go,” he mutters. “Make sure your shirt’s properly ironed. None of that ‘it’s fine, no one will even look at me’ -nonsense.”

“As you wish,” Erwin allows, reaching down to place a quick kiss on Levi’s cheek. “Thank you.”

Levi blushes and waves his hand to dismiss the words, thinking to ask, “Will it go on very late then?”

“Past midnight, I’d guess,” Erwin tells him and Levi clicks his tongue.

“I might as well spend the night then,” he remarks. “Someone needs to help you out of your boots when you come home stinking drunk.”

Erwin laughs, leaning closer to whisper, “I’m sure I’ll be very pleased with your assistance.”

Levi shrugs and grunts, leaning back in the tub as Erwin picks up the tray and leaves the room. Only after he’s gone does Levi let himself smile and feel that new hope pouring into himself for how things have worked themselves out. Killing Osterhaus at an event that Erwin is attending is sure to eliminate him from the list of suspects, especially if he’s still present when it happens. Levi dips his head quickly under the water and comes up, feeling better and cleaner than he has in days.

He takes a different route when leaving Erwin’s that night, walking toward the Frauenkirche and past the Zwinger palace and into Theaterplatz, where he stops to look at the Semperoper, a large, opulent building with rounded walls, three storeys and a score of ornate windows. The entrance faces a large square with a statue of a man riding a horse in the middle; it stands behind Levi, tall and imposing, as he surveys the open area and smiles. They would all exit through the front of the building, gathering onto the square to wait for their cars, their faces recognisable in the glow of the streetlights placed around the area. From his hiding place Levi could go through all of them until he’d find Osterhaus – but where would that be?

He starts to walk away from the Semperoper, keeping an eye on his surroundings as he considers his options. The buildings here are old, their roofs are full of ornate towers and spires, shadows for Levi to disappear in, but looking around himself Levi starts to reconsider; it's a busy area of the city, and it seems unlikely that a man climbing onto a roof here with a rifle on his back would go unnoticed. He keeps walking until he reaches the Frauenkirche, looking up at its high dome which rises far above the rest of the buildings and would offer Levi a clear line of sight, but he abandons the idea; too many churchgoers on Christmas, or so Farlan has told him.

He walks all the way over to the Carola Bridge and thinks to cross the Elbe, doubling back along its bare banks and baring his teeth to the wind as he squints at the Semperoper; he can still see it well enough with nothing but the river and open space between himself and the building. It seems like a better idea to leave that distance between himself and his target, less conspicuous, more prudent. He could use different bridges to cross the river, or hide on this side of it until things calm down; he knows it better than most other parts of the city. The night of December 23rd will be more quiet here, Levi doesn't doubt, maybe even quiet enough to keep him from being seen altogether. He looks around at the several taller buildings lining the riverbank and smiles to himself before directing his steps toward home.

To Levi the week seems to pass slowly, though not a day goes by that he hasn't got something to do or somewhere to be. He spends several days shirking his Volkssturm duties with Farlan again; Erwin tells him they're training everyone more busily now, though no plans are in motion to send any of the city's battalions to the front yet.

"Have you thought of a plan of exit yet?" he asks Levi who nods grimly.

"It was Farlan's idea," he compliments the man who doesn't seem to hear a word he's saying as he sits on the sofa, smoking. "We're telling everyone we're sending Isabel to the country and staying with her there for a few days until she's settled in."

"Do you need my help with anything?" Erwin asks now and Levi nods again, explaining the idea of the party to the man.

"You could come too, if you can," he finishes. "Could bring the record player with you."

"I can't think of a better way to spend my last night in Dresden," Erwin assures him, making Levi frown at the sudden painful twisting of his innards.

While he paces restlessly around Erwin's apartment, Levi's mind is always on the upcoming mission, going over the details, thinking up plans and routes and schemes, trying to solve the problem of the rifle and getting nowhere. It makes him grow more nervous each passing day, until one morning he's left alone with Nanaba and she proposes a solution.

"I was thinking about your problem and I remembered something," she tells him, piling fried cabbage onto her slice of bread and biting into it hungrily. "Someone once told me he used to smuggle in guns by strapping them onto his body one at a time and hiding them under a long baggy coat. I wondered whether such a plan would work for you?"

Levi considers the suggestion for a moment before nodding. “That sounds like it could,” he tells her and she smiles. “Thank you.”

“Please. Anything I can do to help,” she says and groans, running her hands through her hair. “I have more room here than in Flagon Darlett’s chicken coop, it is true, but...” She shakes her head and sighs. “I want to go back outside. I haven’t spent this long indoors in years.”

Levi nods and grunts, knowing he can relate to at least some of what she has said, and suddenly he understands exactly why she’s gotten to be so close with Isabel.

“You are sure you don’t need more help with what you are planning?” she asks him. “I will not mind, whatever it is.”

Levi pushes the fried cabbage around his plate for a moment before turning back to her. “I don’t know,” he tells her apprehensively. “I told Darlett I’d keep you out of harm’s way, and this is dangerous – especially for you.”

Nanaba scoffs loudly. “I think sitting in his little bourgeois palace Flagon has forgotten what it is like out there,” she says, her voice growing soft and low. “There is nothing in this city that is worse than what I have seen. I go out with a knife, it will take eight Gestapo pigs to take me down. Have you ever seen so many at once, walking around out there?”

Levi stops to stare for a moment before he thinks to shake his head. “Can’t say that I have,” he admits and she nods solemnly.

“One or two won’t make me break a sweat,” she assures him. “Tell me what you need and I will do it. For everything you have done for me.”

Levi hesitates for another few seconds before nodding, making her nearly jump up from joy. “I’ll get the rifle from Darlett soon and hide it in here somewhere,” he tells her quickly. “The mission takes place on the 23rd. I need you to bring it to me right before midnight.”

“Where?” Nanaba asks at once.

“I’ll draw you a map,” Levi promises and she nods; the wide smile on her face makes Levi frown. “Aren’t you curious what all of it is for?”

She shrugs and says, “Not very much. You say it is personal – that is your business. With the people you care about you are very gentle so I imagine it is someone who deserves it, no?”

“Yes,” Levi admits readily as images of the smug smile on Osterhaus’ purplish lips and the glob of spittle he left on Erwin’s rug flash across his mind. “Someone who deserves it.”

Darlett seems even less pleased than the previous time when Levi finally shows up at his door in the middle of the night the following Tuesday, having left Erwin sleeping in his bed. Darlett is dressed in his dressing gown again, sighing and yawning as he closes the door of his apartment and leads Levi into a high room with a dark wood panelling and a bookshelf full of leather binds.

“And how is our mutual friend?” he asks Levi in a whisper. “Everything has gone according to plan I hope.”

“She’s fine,” Levi tells Darlett, keeping his eyes on him as he unlocks a tall cupboard and pulls out a rifle that at first glance looks identical to the one Levi used before, but is much more worn-looking upon closer examination.

“Good. I’m glad to hear that,” the man says and it sounds to Levi as though he actually means it. “I’m sure you don’t need the reminder but should you get caught and tortured you should know you were never here, this is not where you got the rifle, and you have never heard the name Erik Müller before in your life.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Levi tells him sourly. “Anyway, I need to borrow a coat.”

“I’m sorry?”

“A coat,” Levi repeats and the man rolls his eyes. “How did you imagine I’m going to get this thing anywhere without getting noticed?”

“And how does my coat come into it?” Darlett asks him.

“It’ll hide the rifle better when I strap it to my back,” Levi explains as if to a two-year-old; to his irritation Darlett merely laughs.

“You, strap this rifle to your back?” he asks Levi and scoffs. “I would’ve thought the world wouldn’t let you forget how miserably short you are.”

Levi grits his teeth. “Well let’s hear one of your shitty ideas then,” he hisses, making Darlett sigh again. “You’ll tie the barrel to my leg and I’ll walk with a limp. Plenty of people do these days.”

He can hear the man muttering something to himself as he leaves the room, returning a while later with a long dark blue trench coat, groaning when he sees Levi fighting with the strings and belts that are supposed to keep the rifle on his back.

“If you survive this ‘mission’ of yours I will be very surprised indeed,” Darlett tells Levi who glares at him as he crosses the room to take over the task, tying the rifle onto Levi’s body effectively if not very gently.

“Tell Erwin I’m sorry if I don’t,” Levi whispers; the words make his heart beat faster.

Darlett sighs again but doesn’t say a word, holding up first Levi’s coat and then his own, letting him shrug into them clumsily.

“Quickly and quietly now,” he tells Levi at the door, “and heaven help me if I see you here again after this.”

“I’d rather ask the Gestapo than you anyway,” Levi tells him, making him cough out a laugh as he opens the door and peers into the hallway before letting Levi pass him and limp his way

home where he hides the rifle in the back of the cleaning cupboard among his broom and mop.

The closer the day of the mission gets the calmer Levi is, though it seems to him he still spends much of his time thinking about it during the days of hiding with Farlan, who reads in the pantry while Levi lies on the sofa; he's run out of things to clean. Little by little it gets easier for Levi to suppress the sting of guilt he feels from lying to Erwin; it seems wrong to spend their last days together feeling anything like it. Being with Farlan, Levi doesn't spend the night and when he finally leaves his apartment on Saturday evening after giving his final instructions to Nanaba, Levi feels a strange mixture of excitement and calm. He remembers the woman's words as he crosses the Augustus Bridge: how she'll die more peacefully knowing she has done the right thing, knowing she has fought against her enemies. By the time Levi gets to Erwin's door, he can't tell who he's doing all this for, himself or Erwin, but seeing the man's smile he is quickly reminded: Erwin, it's all for Erwin.

"You had a bath already," Levi remarks, seeing the man's hair, neatly combed but wet.

"I'm sorry," Erwin says, still smiling. "I didn't realise you wanted to help with that."

Levi clicks his tongue as he shrugs out of his coat. "Don't you start with that," he mutters, making Erwin laugh. "Where are your clothes? I need to see what's wrong with them."

"Why do you think there's something wrong with them?" Erwin asks him back, his face going blank when he sees Levi's unimpressed stare, and he sighs, walking into the bedroom ahead of Levi who stops at the door, glued to the spot.

The uniform hangs from the door of the wardrobe: black trousers above dress shoes of polished black leather, a white collar shirt with a black tie inside a black jacket, the red of the swastika armband screaming at Levi from the left sleeve. He moves his gaze to take in the assortment of items on the chest of drawers: an officer's peaked cap with the skull and eagle one above the other, belts and straps and other bells and whistles laid down neatly beside it. Levi turns to look at his feet and leans onto the doorframe, exhaling slowly and rubbing at the goosebumps on his arm.

"Are you alright?" Erwin asks, worried and hesitant, and Levi hurries to nod.

"No point wasting any time," he simply states, walking forward to yank the trousers, shirt and tie off the hanger, giving Erwin a calming nudge on his way out.

Levi irons the clothes and presses the trousers, handing each item to Erwin only when he deems it neat and wrinkle-free enough. He ties the tie and puts the cufflinks in place, frowning the whole time though Erwin smiles, distracting Levi every once in a while by brushing his hand against Levi's cheek until Levi finally grabs his collar and pulls him down for a quick kiss.

"This I don't mind," Levi says, looking at Erwin in his dress shirt and trousers, his feet still bare as they stick out from the legs – the most handsome man Levi has ever seen. "Any

chance you could go without that fucking ugly piece of shit jacket?"

"If only there were," Erwin mutters, looking suddenly so sad that Levi starts to regret his words.

"Might not be so bad," he rushes to say, pulling the jacket off the hanger and handing it to Erwin. "Means I'll get to take it off you later."

To Levi's relief, Erwin utters a laugh. "You know how careless I am with clothes," he says. "I might end up leaving it on the floor where anyone can step on it."

Levi lets out a snort of a laugh too. "Maybe we'll even—"

His words cut off and leave behind a heavy silence that Erwin makes worse by clearing his throat. Levi looks at his feet for a moment before turning suddenly to the chest of drawers to find a pair of black socks while Erwin shrugs into the jacket. He busies himself further with the belt and medals while Erwin pulls on his socks and shoes, which Levi kneels down to polish even further, though they hardly need it.

When all of the little knick-knacks and baubles are in place and the hat is sitting securely on top of Erwin's head, Levi takes a step back to inspect the damage. Though he wants to, he can't keep himself from shuddering as he stares at Erwin and crinkles his nose, swearing under his breath.

"What a fucking waste of fabric," he mutters, trying to make Erwin feel better by flashing him a quick smile. "Got you looking presentable at least, so I guess the hard part's done."

By the door Erwin pulls on a long double-buttoned overcoat and a pair of clean white gloves. As soon as he's finished buttoning up he groans.

"I'm already sweating," he mutters and Levi steps closer to straighten the sleeves.

"Don't wear it indoors then," he tells the man dryly before turning to look at him with a frown. "I'll be here when you get back."

"It'll be the one thought that gets me through this evening," Erwin says quietly, pulling Levi against him for a few seconds before taking his leave.

The sound of the door closing marks the start of a long wait for Levi, hours during which he tries to rest, tries to clean, even chooses a book from Erwin's collection and sits down to read it, giving up after five minutes when he runs into the first word he's never seen or heard before. He keeps looking at the clock, then decides not to let himself look at it only to find himself staring at it a quarter hour later. His feelings seem to be as restless as he is, bouncing from exhilaration to pangs of nervousness that make him want to reconsider and wonder again how he could have forgotten his vow to stay out of trouble so entirely. However, it only takes one glance at the secretaire for Levi to calm himself down, to find his reasons and purpose.

He finally sets out at half an hour before midnight, passing through the nigh empty streets quickly and quietly. To his relief he notes he seems to have been right; few people are out so late a day before Christmas Eve, and the closer he gets to the Augustus Bridge, the fewer of them there seem to be. He guesses many of them are on their way to midnight services in the churches near the Semperoper, and by the time the bells of the Frauenkirche ring out in sign of the changing of the day, most of them have reached their destinations, leaving the city quiet and the bank across the Elbe nearly deserted.

Even so, Levi has trouble spotting Nanaba as she waits for him in the small wooded area by the building of the Finanzministerium which stands dark and lifeless in the night; no one's working at this hour. They exchange nothing but curt nods before Levi starts helping the rifle off her back, keeping to the shadows that are even more impenetrable under the trees. A single car drives by somewhere behind the building; otherwise everything remains soundless.

After another curt nod Nanaba starts walking, leaving behind the Elbe and Levi who swings the rifle onto his back and approaches the building, circling it before entering one of the inner courtyards where he finds a way up to the roof. He lies down flat on his stomach, stopping to listen and look around himself to make sure he's not been seen before starting to crawl toward the glass cupola in the middle, peering down carefully into the building; not a flicker of light seems to be on. Levi continues toward the edge, stopping in the shadow of the raised roof that stands behind the painted pediment overlooking the river, leaning the rifle against the tiles and peering through the scope. The dim lighting reminds him of the target practice until he finds the Theaterplatz where the lights of the square drive away most of the darkness. He focuses onto the entrance of the Semperoper, finds his position, and waits.

It seems to take a long time before Levi begins to feel anything, before the cold starts to bury itself into his very bones. It feels like the coldest night of the winter so far, and Levi tries to bury his face into his scarf to warm up the tip of his nose with his breath. He pulls on the thick woollen glove he took off to feel the trigger, flexing his fingers to keep them moving as his body breaks into shivers that grow more violent after every passing minute until suddenly they stop. When Levi jabs at his thigh he feels next to nothing, but for now he decides being numb is better for staying still, and pulls the rifle into his body as he looks through the scope.

His gaze passes over them, the women in their furs and diamonds, the men in their double-buttoned overcoats, their breaths visible in the cold weather and blurring their faces from Levi's view as he searches, growing more anxious after every second, thinking that every car that drives off is carrying Osterhaus within it to safety. Levi slows down his pace as he goes over the crowd a second time, exhaling sharply when he finally spots the man, whose mouth the cold seems to have made more purple than usual. He keeps his eyes fixed on his target now that he's found it, sneering quietly at the smug expression on his face; he's talking to someone, another tall officer whom Levi barely notices as he looks at the spots, the chest, the head, the stomach.

He lets it all flash through his mind, all that Osterhaus has done and said, all of Erwin's pain that would never have been if Osterhaus hadn't gotten the upper hand, if Levi hadn't failed and given it to him. Suddenly it all feels like he's simply fixing his mistakes, like he's making up for something he did wrong, like he's ridding himself of the guilt that keeps him apart from Erwin, keeps him wanting to apologise, keeps him lost for words. He pulls off the glove

with his teeth, flinching at the touch of the trigger though he wants to feel it, the cruel cold of the metal when he finally fires. He has decided: three shots to be sure, first to the chest and the rest wherever he can best aim when the man falls down. He draws a deep breath and holds it, letting it hiss out from between his teeth as he prepares, distracted for a second as the man by Osterhaus' side moves, his face suddenly coming to light.

Erwin.

Levi's fingers fly off the trigger and he gasps, drawing back from the scope and losing his focus. When he looks through the scope again he can see nothing but the dark, murky waters of the Elbe and he swears quietly, finding the stairs again as quickly as he can. They're still talking, Osterhaus and Erwin, but the way the old man has started slowly descending the stairs makes Levi panic. He hesitates, places his finger half-heartedly back on the trigger as he watches Erwin, measures the distance, knows it's a matter of one move, one step, one second of action that Erwin doesn't know to avoid. He barely realises he's panting now, his heart lurching when Erwin comes down a stair and closer to Osterhaus, and he knows if he's going to do it, it has to be done now. He moves the focus from Osterhaus to Erwin, takes in the sombre expression, the rigidity of his shoulders and how there's nothing left on the man's appearance now from the easy laughs of just a few hours ago, of the way he pulled Levi into him, of the way he let Levi make him smile with a kiss.

Levi steadies himself, takes a deep breath and closes his eyes before locking onto Osterhaus, telling himself he only needs the one shot. Erwin will back away when the man goes down, a reflex, he won't be able to help it. He measures the distance one more time, – half a metre, a metre perhaps, and why would Erwin want to go anywhere closer to that piece of shit, Levi is sure he won't – moves his finger more firmly onto the trigger and takes the shot.

Through the chest.

Levi watches Osterhaus fall back, his face showing pure surprise as he looks at Erwin from the ground. He's further now, that's all Levi knows, it's all he's aware of as he focuses again and shoots once, twice.

Through the throat and through the head.

He doesn't need the scope to know there's panic on the square, and at the end of the day that's nothing to him. Levi knows his priorities now with absolute clarity: get down from the roof, cross the river by the Albert Bridge before the police set up their patrols, take the long way around to Erwin's but make sure to keep that promise, to be there before he gets back. Levi keeps between the buildings, deeming the riverbank too open as he walks swiftly but – he hopes – inconspicuously toward and across the bridge, relieved to find it empty of police and soldiers both. He turns away from the opera house, walking around for several kilometres before getting to Erwin's apartment.

The cold he didn't feel before returns in a crash, forcing Levi to pull out a heavy quilt and wrap himself in it; it does little to make him feel warmer. He's still shivering when he hears the key in the lock, sitting in the corner of the sofa in the dark sitting room that Erwin enters slowly and, it seems to Levi, somehow hesitantly.

“Fun party, was it?” he asks the man who takes off his hat and gloves and places them on the secretaire.

“Levi,” Erwin whispers and for a moment Levi fears the darkness in his voice signals disappointment. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Done what?” he asks back, watching as Erwin’s face grows blank.

“Levi—”

“What a mess,” Levi says to interrupt him, clicking his tongue as he takes in the spattering of blood that looks pitch black in the darkness. “I guess I get to watch you bathe tonight after all.”

Erwin meets his eyes sombrely from across the room, looking at him without speaking for a long while. Levi can’t read the expression on his face, can’t tell if he’s pleased or not but knows: he himself has no regrets, not a single one.

“It looks to me as if you could use one yourself,” Erwin finally says, his voice quiet and gentle.

Levi scoffs. “Must be coming down with something,” he remarks, throwing the quilt reluctantly off himself. “Come on then. The bath isn’t going to draw itself.”

Levi gets into the tub while Erwin cleans the worst of the blood off himself; drops of it have flown onto his face and on his clothes which Levi watches him remove, enjoying the way they disappear one by one until all he can see is Erwin, pure Erwin, all muscle and beauty and grace as he joins Levi in the water. They sit in silence for a while before Erwin leans back onto Levi and tells him about the night, about the music, about the champagne. Neither of them mentions Osterhaus but Levi finds he can count the days better now: eight until Erwin leaves.

They move into the bed, facing each other in the silence, Levi on his usual place, sitting on Erwin’s thighs. He pushes his fingers into Erwin’s hair as they kiss, pulling at the wet tangles to make Erwin gasp and open his mouth, and suddenly the way Erwin strokes his arms feels too gentle and too safe. Levi moves the man’s hands onto his back as he curls his own around his cock, surprised to find even that doesn’t satisfy his impatience, his curiosity, his hunger for having Erwin close, finally having him closer. He guides the hands down, lowering them bit by bit until the pressure from Erwin’s fingers makes Levi groan and push into the touch. He can’t help smiling against Erwin’s lips as the man finishes, faster for the feel of his body or the excitement of the night, Levi isn’t sure.

He jumps from the bed, feeling that shortness of breath coming over him, that fear that even now is only half-drowned and threatening to pierce the surface. He’s already at the bathroom door when Erwin’s voice stops him suddenly.

“I wish you could stay,” he whispers. No sadness, no blame; just an admission, plain and honest.

Levi stands still, looking down at his body in the dark, at the small prick that's grown out of that thicket of dark hair, of the tip of it that's so different from Erwin's, at what it all means and what it's branded him as: dirty, useless, disposable, stupid, scum, vermin, nothing.

Nothing.

He can tell Erwin is looking at him and oh, how he looks at Levi, how he's always looked at Levi: like he is everything, like he is exciting and clever, like he has stories to tell and things to teach him: like he is everything.

Levi walks back to the bed steadily and reclaims the place he left on Erwin, close to his warmth, with his breath and eyes heavy on him. His hands are lost again until Levi finds them and shows them where to go, down his sides, on his hips and onto his thighs as he pushes Erwin against the headboard, letting him see, wanting him to. He starts slowly, the fear still halting his hand while he keeps his eyes closed, on himself, on anything but Erwin's face that's full of want and awe. It seems to Levi like he's barely breathing as he lies underneath him, completely still, as if afraid that a wrong move will make Levi change his mind. Levi watches as the growing speed of his hand encourages Erwin, brings his fingers to life, to grip Levi's flesh as he leans onto him, tensing with the release that feels like deliverance, feels like his first.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- death
- violence
- sexual content

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Summer update schedule is a bit different than what I've done previously because I have more time to focus on Dresden and also because I don't want to spend my holidays living from deadline to deadline. Instead of giving an exact date for my updates, I'll keep posting chapters as I finish them.

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!
I'm also on [Twitter](#).

There is something special at the end of this chapter as well so [here's a link to a private post](#) I made earlier today. The thanks for the lyrics and translations should be directed at the wonderful and kind [hagamode](#) who not only did all of them herself but also shared the eruri feels of this song when I (and by I, I mean my girlfriend) found it buried in the cobwebs of youtube. If I started thanking my girlfriend and crediting her for everything she's done, I'd never stop - you'll get the reference later.

Lowkey gifting this chapter to lostcauses who will understand why once she reads this.

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The train is travelling fast, rattling along the tracks; Levi can feel the change from one stretch of rails to the other in the way the cattle car moves, he can hear it in that metallic clink that carries in through the floor. He peers out through a crack between the boards on the walls, looks at the landscape as it blurs in the speed. Everything looks grey and dull, even the snow looks dirty, but when he turns back toward the carriage, he realises how bright everything is outside. He sits down, quiet in the darkness, hugging his knees to his chest to keep away the cold that seems to be in him rather than around him. Someone enters the carriage and Levi frowns, knowing he should be surprised to see it's Kenny.

“What did you do with the shoes I got you?” his uncle asks, sounding angry and hurt, making Levi look down at his worn work boots.

“I grew out of them,” he explains feebly, kicking off his shoes in a fit of guilt. “You can have these if you want.”

Kenny looks at him for a while in silence before sighing in irritation and scratching the back of his head. “I guess I never learned to say it right,” Levi can just hear him mutter before he wakes up, blinking in the sudden brightness; Erwin has lit a candle.

“Levi,” he calls out gently, his hand falling off Levi’s arm when he sits up, shivering.

“I’m not feeling well,” he mumbles, flinching as Erwin presses his hand against his forehead; for the first time since they met it feels cool to the touch.

“You have a fever,” the man diagnoses in a whisper as Levi coughs and winces at the sharp sting of pain he can feel in the back of his throat. “Are you in any pain?”

“Feel like someone’s shoving a fork up my nose,” Levi tells him, rubbing at his face and groaning at the ache in his limbs. “Hurts fucking everywhere.”

“You’ve caught a cold,” Erwin says, throwing the covers off himself and getting up. He rummages in the cupboard for a moment before throwing two quilts on Levi. “I’ll make some tea.”

Levi grunts a reply and falls back on the bed, curling up under the covers that seem like a poor substitute for Erwin, his body convulsing with shivers; he’s nodded off again by the time Erwin returns with the tea and a bowlful of cold water into which he drops a small towel.

“Drink your tea first,” he instructs Levi, handing him a large mug, at least twice the size of the delicate little cups they usually drink from. “Are you hungry?”

Levi shakes his head and sneezes, almost spilling the tea as Erwin hands him a soft white handkerchief; the initials E.H. are embroidered neatly in one corner in grey thread. Levi blows his nose on it and shudders.

“You’ll need to rest,” Erwin tells him gently and Levi looks up to see his expression: caring but not worried. “Did you stay out in the cold for long?”

Levi thinks back to the mission, how quickly his body grew numb to the cruel weather, how the lights of the square guided him to his target. He remembers the shock on Erwin’s face when Osterhaus fell down and as he glances at the man now, he almost expects to see something unpleasant in his expression; hesitation, anger, disgust. In this moment it seems to Levi that he must deserve it, must deserve some retribution for what he has done.

“Hard to say. I lost track of time. I left before midnight though,” he says nonetheless, wiping his nose on the handkerchief.

Erwin hums a response, sliding one of his hands under the covers to run up and down Levi’s leg; the touch is much more comforting than the man knows, Levi is certain. “What did Darlett want,” he asks, looking up at Levi’s face, “in exchange for his assistance?”

“Nanaba,” Levi merely whispers back, and the other man seems to understand at once.

“How convenient for him,” he comments, uttering a dry laugh before growing more serious again. “You went through a lot of trouble.”

Levi shrugs. “I had my reasons,” he replies, not going further into them, and Erwin doesn’t ask him to.

“Sometimes I fear you’ll come to resent me,” he says, his eyes on the floor, “for what I have turned you into.”

Levi clicks his tongue and frowns. “We both know I’d be dead if it weren’t for you, so you can shut your mouth,” he counters almost angrily, making Erwin smile. “Aren’t you supposed to cut this crap now that I’m ill? You have to put me through hearing you say shit like this now?”

Erwin’s smile turns into a laugh that sounds almost more like a cough. “How inexcusably rude of me,” he comments and Levi nods sternly.

“You know I don’t believe any of that ‘superior officer’ crap,” Levi tells him. “What I do with my time is my business.”

“I’m not worried about you as a superior officer, Levi.”

“I know,” he says and sighs. “But you know what I mean. It was my decision.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, “it was, and I’m pleased you haven’t come to regret it – yet, in any case.”

“I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for that,” Levi mutters into his tea and coughs as Erwin goes on.

“I assume you had your reasons for not telling me.”

Levi shrugs. “I knew you’d try and talk me out of it,” he explains in short, barely daring to glance at Erwin when he says, “It’s not going to start any trouble, is it?”

Erwin seems lost in his thoughts for a moment before he shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so,” he replies quietly. “Some of the police wondered whether I was actually the intended target, which I suppose means there aren’t many people who think I had anything to do with it.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “Three clean shots on that Nazi swine and still they think I was aiming at you,” he mutters and shakes his head, sipping at his tea as the ghost of that fear he felt earlier makes him speak out. “I was just about to fire when I realised you were right next to him. Made me a bit nervous I’d miss.”

Erwin turns to look at him and gives his knee a gentle squeeze. “I could have told you that you wouldn’t,” he says and smiles.

Levi can feel his cheeks growing warm and blames the fever and the hot tea, which he finishes in a few large gulps. Erwin takes the mug from him and places it on the nightstand as Levi lies down on the bed, flinching as he feels the cool, wet towel on his forehead.

“That’s cold,” he complains as Erwin brushes his fingers through Levi’s hair; another one of his casual touches Levi’s grown used to, and one that seems to warm him much better than the tea.

“Should I come warm you up?” he asks and Levi nods wordlessly, shifting on the bed as Erwin shuffles closer under the covers.

“You’ll sweat,” Levi points out when he pulls the quilts closer to his chin, and Erwin hums in agreement.

“No doubt we’ll both survive it,” he mutters, falling quiet for a moment before whispering, “I’m not sure whether I ought to thank you or not.”

Levi sneers and snuffles, pulling the quilts over his chin and closing his eyes. “I don’t know about that,” he replies. “All I know is that if I started thanking you for every little thing you’ve done for me, I’d say nothing else for the rest of my life so I might as well not start.”

He can feel Erwin’s laughter as small puffs of air against the nape of his neck. “It’s no small thing you did,” he insists, “but I understand what you mean.”

Levi lets out a quiet grunt and turns onto his side, pressing his back against Erwin; the last thing he knows before he drifts off to sleep is the man adjusting the cold towel on his head. He wakes up when Erwin replaces it, but the room is still dark and the city beyond quiet, so he allows himself to sink back down on the mattress and doze off with Erwin’s arms around him for comfort. They’ve disappeared when Levi finally comes to again, woken up by a series of banging and shuffling noises and blinking in the brightness that tells him he must have slept for hours. He’s kicked off the quilts to the foot of the bed and after a moment of searching he finds the towel in a wet lump on the floor from where he picks it up, dropping it back in the bowl as the noise that woke him carries out from beyond the bedroom door again. He’s already halfway out of the bed and ready to make a run for the razor when Erwin enters so carefully and quietly the exaggeration almost makes Levi laugh.

“Oh,” he voices, sounding a touch surprised. “You’re awake.”

Levi grunts and rubs at his face, pulling one of the quilts around himself as Erwin crosses the room, placing his hand on Levi’s forehead.

“Your fever has broken,” he confirms what Levi’s already suspected, sounding a touch relieved despite having stayed so calm earlier. “How do you feel?”

Levi considers the question, feeling the lingering ache in his body, the soreness of his throat and the stabbing pain somewhere behind his nose and eyes, eventually merely sighing and muttering, “I’ll live.”

“You’re not leaving yet, are you?” Erwin asks Levi, following him with his eyes as he gets dressed. “You should at least eat something before you go. I’ll make you breakfast.”

Levi glances at Erwin, frowning at the strange note in his tone; a new kind of sadness that seems to mix with a touch of desperation. There’s nothing of it on Erwin’s face, nothing in his expression but a hint of wistfulness, and Levi wonders whether he imagined it all or whether his own feelings coloured what he heard but when he nods, he can’t escape the relief that floods Erwin’s features.

Levi waits on the sofa while Erwin makes breakfast, wrapped up in the quilt and staring at the small spruce leaning against the wall by the secretaire next to a small cardboard box Levi hasn't seen before. He eats his bread and boiled egg while Erwin lights a cigarette and crouches down to fit the tree in a metal stand, swearing under his breath as he struggles with the screws that are supposed to keep it upright.

"Is it straight?" he turns around to ask Levi, losing his balance and landing on his arse on the floor.

Levi lets out an ugly snort of laughter that turns the tips of Erwin's ears pink as he fights onto his feet, standing up to survey the tree from a distance. Levi finds it difficult to keep his eyes on it instead of on the blush now spreading to Erwin's cheeks; for a moment it even makes him forget the discomfort he's in.

"Looks alright to me," Levi tells the man who glances back at him, smoking his cigarette and smiling before crossing the room to the corner cupboard. He puts on a record – a choir singing songs Levi knows to associate with Christmas – and pulls out a bottle of amber liquor, pouring some in a glass for himself and splashing a bit into Levi's cup of tea. It burns his already sore throat, but Levi doesn't mind. "Need help?"

"No, no. You should rest," Erwin tells him, shaking his head and sipping at his drink before placing the smoke between his lips. "I'll manage."

Levi watches him as he starts to go through the box, lifting out ornaments and hanging them on the branches; brightly coloured baubles and silver tinsel that sparkles in the glow of the small candles Erwin lights to finish decorating the tree. His expression seems to Levi to be an odd mix of pride, contentedness and nostalgia when he looks at his work, emptying his glass and lighting another cigarette. Suddenly Levi wonders whether Erwin didn't want him to go because of this, because he doesn't want to spend another Christmas alone.

"This is really important to you, isn't it?" he asks the man who looks up, surprised.

"I have good memories of it, yes," Erwin admits and that nostalgia seeps back into his expression. "My childhood Christmases were a mix of Austrian and English traditions, and I've found celebrating here brings it all back – even now."

"Your mother is Austrian," Levi says, not sure himself whether it's a question, and Erwin nods.

"My parents met when my father was travelling in Europe," he says, his smile changing from nostalgic to warm and happy. "He was taking the Grand Tour and was passing through Austria-Hungary on his way to Greece."

"What the hell is a Grand Tour?"

Erwin looks a touch embarrassed when he begins. "Traditionally young men from the upper classes spend a few months touring Europe to complete their education after university," he explains, making Levi sneer.

“I knew you were rich, didn’t I?” he says, drinking his tea as Erwin laughs.

“Well, my father’s family opposed my parents’ marriage, ever more so after the war broke out,” Erwin explains, “so they cut him off from the family money. We were by no means poor, but his choice to marry my mother meant my father lacked many of the connections and opportunities that would have been open to him otherwise.”

Levi nods along, not really knowing what to say until he thinks to ask, “What did they have against your mother then?”

“They felt she wasn’t a good match both for reasons of class and her being Austrian,” Erwin says. “It was also quite the scandal. As you know, I was born in Austria, and my parents only married after my mother moved to England.”

“So you’re a bastard?” Levi blurts out, relieved when Erwin barks out a laugh.

“Yes, that is correct,” he replies, taking a deep breath off his cigarette.

“Guess that’s another thing we have in common,” Levi muses, coughing as the liquor burns its way down his throat. “Who knows, if the piece of shit who got my mother pregnant hadn’t been such a cunt, maybe we’d be even more alike.”

“Perhaps,” Erwin agrees, eyeing Levi from the corner of his eye before jumping suddenly to his feet and disappearing into the bedroom. When he returns he’s holding a small envelope in his hand. “I can’t believe I almost forgot about this.”

“That’s not a gift, is it?” Levi asks him, crinkling his nose. “I told you I don’t like—”

“I know, presents make you suspicious,” Erwin interrupts him and sighs, holding out the envelope. “I was hoping you’d be familiar enough with my motives by now to accept it.”

Levi looks at the plain white paper for a moment before snatching it from Erwin, stopping to blow his nose before ripping it open as the man beside him shifts in his seat, seeming suddenly nervous. Levi peers inside the envelope for a few seconds before pulling out the contents: an old brown and white photograph, the decoratively cut edges of which press softly against his fingertips as he holds it gently and stares. Against a simple background the camera has captured a man and a woman, both young and modestly dressed with serious expressions on their faces. She sits in a chair, straight-backed in her white shirt and long, dark skirt while he stands beside her, wearing what Levi can easily guess is his best suit, and holding a wide-brimmed hat.

“You have her eyes,” Erwin whispers, pointing at the woman’s face. “See? And her nose.”

Levi turns the photograph around to see the black ink markings on the back: Kenny and Kuchel, 1919.

“Where did you get this?” His words are hardly more than a gasp.

“It wasn’t easy to find,” Erwin admits, “but I did help develop the filing system. You can retrace many steps when you know how the information moves and where it’s kept.”

Levi turns the photograph around again and keeps staring, his eyes glued to the woman – his mother. Levi feels as though he needs to make himself believe it really is her, that this is how she looked when he was born, maybe how she still looked not long before she started to waste away. What Erwin said is true: she has the same eyes and the same nose that Levi sees when he looks at himself in the mirror. Her dark hair is fitted on top of her head in an elaborate array of braids; it makes her neck look longer, Levi suddenly remembers her telling someone, a woman from their neighbourhood who sometimes brought him apples when she visited. In a flash he recalls a score of other memories, of his mother brushing her long hair, how far it fell down her back when she plaited it, how she used to tickle his face with the tassel formed by the tips.

“Should I not have?” Erwin asks him, and Levi hurries to shake his head as he places the photograph carefully back in the envelope.

“It’s...” he starts, his voice breaking as he glances at Erwin before blowing his nose again. “This fucking cold...”

Levi feels a tightness in his throat that keeps him from looking at the other man. Even with the picture hidden, Levi finds himself staring at the plain white envelope, like what it hides has burned itself into his memory even after one look. He thinks back again to the last time he saw his mother, before Kenny came to take him away: hollow cheeks and wide-open eyes that looked up at the wet blotches on the ceiling, all that lovely hair so greasy and tangled. Levi can still remember it, can almost feel it even now, how light and frail she was when he shook her, when he pushed and shoved her and clutched her arm so tightly the bones under her paper-thin skin dug into his fingers. It doesn’t feel real anymore, that he would have spent several days with her in that room, crouched in the corner like an animal, staring at her, always staring, learning more lessons about hopes and dreams and wishes in those few days than during near two decades living with Kenny.

“I don’t know how...” Levi begins again, but his words falter.

“I thought you’d decided not to start thanking me,” Erwin reminds Levi of his earlier words, making him scoff.

Without knowing what to say, Levi lifts his gaze to meet Erwin’s, steady, unwavering, trying to show what he can’t say, and it feels to him like Erwin understands – like he always understands. There’s a warmth in the man’s eyes, and a sadness too, like he feels Levi’s pain, like he wants to shoulder some of it but doesn’t know how.

“I didn’t get you anything,” Levi finally mutters, smiling when Erwin laughs quietly.

“Didn’t you?” he asks, placing his hand on Levi’s thigh for a moment before he gets to his feet and disappears into the kitchen, coming back a while later with more tea and a plateful of biscuits, the swastikas again broken neatly in two.

When Levi finally leaves some time past noon, Erwin insists on joining him to make sure he gets home safely, and Levi doesn’t have it in him to resist though they both know it’s grossly

out of character for Holtz. By the time they reach the bridge, Levi almost hopes Erwin could pick him up and carry him; the cold multiplies all the different kinds of ache in his body by a hundred as he tries to relieve the pain in his nose by breathing into his scarf. Levi can feel Erwin glancing at him every time he blows his nose, until he finally hisses an order at him to stop fretting.

They're stopped at the Augustus Bridge by a police officer who tells them about the events of the previous evening and asks them if they've happened to see anything out of the ordinary, but when Erwin mentions he attended the concert and saw what happened, they're let through without anyone bothering to check their papers. Levi wishes his neighbours also showed such indifference; he can catch both Böhmer and Frau Niemeyer in their respective windows when they finally leave the wind-swept street and enter the building.

Isabel is the first to rush to meet Erwin, throwing her arms around him and making him laugh out of both surprise and delight.

"Did you come to spend Christmas with us?" she asks excitedly, growing gloomy only for a dozen seconds when he says he hasn't before whispering, "Did you come to see Nan?"

"I just wanted to walk Levi home," he replies smiling. "Your big brother isn't feeling very well."

Isabel's expression grows instantly worried. "What's wrong?" she asks, turning to Levi who sighs.

"I'm fine," he assures her, stopping to cough and wincing at the soreness in his throat. "It's just a cold, that's all."

"Do you need my medicine?" she asks now, turning to Erwin when Levi shakes his head. "Do you have to go right away? It'll help big brother if you stay a bit longer."

"I suppose I could be persuaded to stay for a cup of tea – should someone offer me one," Erwin tells her with a smile, making her gasp.

"Tea! Erwin needs tea!" she exclaims, running into the kitchen to pester Farlan, who's standing by the stove, looking after half a dozen pots and pans, barely managing a nod to Erwin or Levi with Isabel hanging off his sleeve.

"Yes, alright! I'll put the kettle on if you'll just..." he tells her impatiently, pointing at the table. "Go sit down and stop bothering me!"

Isabel does as she's told, taking a seat opposite of Erwin as Nanaba walks out of the bedroom, stretching her arms above her head and yawning. When she sees Erwin, her face lights up with an easy smile.

"You dare to show that ugly face around here?" she asks him, and judging by their quiet laughs it's some sort of a joke they share that doesn't make sense to the rest of them.

"It's wonderful to see you looking so well," Erwin replies as Nanaba sits down to join them.

“I have been well looked after here,” she says, smiling at Isabel and messing up her hair. “You look well too – better than last time.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, glancing at Levi. “I too have been well looked-after.”

Levi clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes, but doesn’t speak, and Erwin and Nanaba switch quickly to hastily whispered French, and Levi’s not sure why he’s surprised to learn Erwin can speak it. They’re exchanging news, Levi guesses, the kind they would rather not share. He can tell from Farlan’s rigid posture that he’s listening intently, but it’s not clear to him how much he can actually hear or understand. Nanaba ends the exchange with a hiss of a swear just as Farlan carries the tea to the table, drawing up a stool to sit on as well.

“You sound congested,” he says after Levi thanks him for the tea, growing sour when Erwin explains the situation and muttering, “Just what we need now – for us all to get sick like you.”

“Is there anything that still needs to be done regarding the party on New Year’s?” Erwin asks Farlan, changing effortlessly to his usual Austrian-accented German.

Farlan shakes his head, accepting a smoke and letting Erwin light it. “If you can rustle up some liquor I’m sure everyone would appreciate it,” he notes with a sullen shrug, nodding as Erwin promises to see what he can do.

“I’d say you’re as prepared to disappear as you’ll ever be,” Erwin says, making Levi shudder at the thought. “The party should provide a reasonable explanation for your not returning – as long as you play your cards right.”

“So you think they’ll believe it?” Farlan asks him. “That someone’s ratted us out to the Gestapo?”

Erwin shrugs. “From what Levi has told me it seems your neighbours think I’m helping all of you with more than just food,” he says. “Should I mention that I’m leaving the following day, it might explain the sudden courage to report you.”

Farlan nods, taking a deep drag out of his cigarette as Nanaba lights one as well. “They don’t think you’re doing it for free, either,” he comments, glancing at Levi. “Helping us, I mean.”

“As long as none of them actually go to the Gestapo they can think whatever the fuck they want for all I care,” Levi growls, not wanting to admit how easily that could be seen as the truth now.

“Calm down, Levi,” Farlan whispers, looking irritated. “No one’s calling you a whore – no one who’s present, anyway.” He fills the uncomfortable silence that falls by breathing out a cloud of smoke that makes Levi cough. “Though you have to admit it’s not far from the mark.”

The first person to whom Levi’s eyes are drawn is Isabel, who stares at the surface of the table with a distant look in her eyes, like she’s barely listening to them now. Next to him

Erwin shifts in his seat and Levi catches the man glancing at him as he turns slightly so his foot brushes against Levi's leg. He can't think of anything to say.

"Of course I don't mean you, Erwin," Farlan clarifies, keeping his eyes on the man, like watching his reaction. "Not really, anyway. I meant the other man Levi used to see – not that he told me anything about it, but the way he used to wince a bit every time he sat down the following day... Well, it doesn't take a scientist to figure it out."

The words take Levi back to those hateful evenings in Krieger's bed, those moments of pain and humiliation, how quickly he lost himself when he entered those rooms. The memories seem to paralyse his tongue, turning him away from the instinctive anger and toward something else, something he can't name but which he felt after the night he spent in the Gestapo cell; a sort of nothingness, an invisibility that makes him think his words – even if he managed to speak them – would be of no consequence. He looks at Farlan and frowns at how pleased he looks with himself, and wonders what's making the man say these things, whether it's just his wounded trust in Levi that's making him lash out.

The silence is finally broken by Nanaba who stretches out her legs under the table and says, "We all do what we have to do." There's a coldness in her expression when she glances at Farlan before turning to Levi and giving him a curt nod. "This too I have done once or twice, and I feel no shame for it. My reasons were good enough for me – no matter what anyone else says."

Levi nods back and lets her words guide him to the beginning, to that hungry little glint in Krieger's eyes that made Levi misjudge him. His reasons were good – otherwise he wouldn't have considered any of it in the first place – but knowing Farlan was one of them makes his words sting even more. Levi glances quickly at Erwin, whose stare seems to make Farlan grow increasingly uncomfortable until he gets up from his seat suddenly to tend to his pots and pans.

"Mike will come and get her in a few days' time," Erwin tells Levi as they're saying goodbye at the door. "I expect no problems – he's used to getting around unnoticed."

Levi thinks of the man's hulking frame and scoffs, but when he eventually does arrive, it is with a whisper of a knock on the door in the early hours between night and dawn. The sound doesn't wake Levi; he only finds out the following morning when he discovers the man curled up next to the sofa without so much as a wisp of a quilt on him but fast asleep nonetheless. At first glance it seems Nanaba is asleep beside him, but when Levi takes a few steps forward she turns to him and he realises she must have been staring at the man instead. She nods toward the kitchen and they leave him to his slumber; Levi busies himself with the stove while Nanaba pulls Isabel's covers further toward the girl's chin, drawing up the stool and coming to sit by Levi.

"There was trouble on the road," she whispers so quietly Levi can barely hear; the hurt in her voice comes through even in those simple words. "He insists that it is nothing serious, but he has been hurt. He is an idiot, always saying such stupid things and scaring me half to death pulling off shit like this, like I do not care and like he does not have a mind of his own, the fucking–"

“Does he need a doctor?” Levi asks, interrupting her. “Erwin knows someone if–”

“No, I will take care of it,” she says, smiling tiredly. “I am used to it. But thank you.” She falls quiet for a moment, looking embarrassed. “I was hoping – if that is alright – that we could stay here a little bit longer, just a few days until–”

“Of course,” Levi promises without further thought. “Whatever you need.”

Nanaba smiles again, her face alight with relief. “I do not know how to thank you,” she says seriously. “Maybe one day I will get a chance to help you in return.”

“You already did,” Levi replies, lowering his voice even further. “I couldn’t have carried out the mission without you.”

She shrugs. “It was nothing,” she whispers. “I am glad to hear it went well.”

Levi smiles, thinking about the way the bullets ripped through Osterhaus’ flesh, like the fire is now starting to rip through the logs. “Yes,” he says. “It went very well.”

Nanaba smiles for another small moment before growing serious again. “I think it is all these secrets,” she says, “that makes Farlan so cruel.”

Levi stops what he’s doing and sighs. After Erwin left they managed to fall into their usual festivities, eating more than they should have and playing cards in candlelight, telling stories to Nanaba about their previous Christmases while drinking tea and eating some of the biscuits Erwin had brought with him. Something hung in the air between them, however, something that became far less bearable the moment Levi and Farlan were alone together in their bed. Neither of them spoke of the incident but it was written all over their rigid postures and the space they left between each other’s bodies. The only thing Farlan said before falling asleep was a remark about Nanaba’s absence the previous night. Not knowing what else to say, Levi merely repeated his promise to explain it all later, a gesture Farlan greeted with a dismissive sneer.

“You will want to resolve this one day, I think,” Nanaba whispers hesitantly. “I hope one day he will understand why you have done this.”

Levi sighs again. “Maybe,” he says, glancing at the bedroom door.

When Farlan finally wakes and enters the kitchen, he is pale and frowning, walking over to Levi to whisper, “I assume you’re aware there’s an unusually large man sleeping on our sitting room floor.”

“I am sorry,” Nanaba jumps in, having heard the quiet words. “It is my fault. He has come to get me.”

Farlan doesn’t look pleased by the news, ever less so when Levi tells him Nanaba and Mike will be staying another couple of days.

“He will not be any trouble,” Nanaba explains with a smile. “He is quiet, and eats far less than you’d think a man his size would.”

“Well, we’re all sad to see you go, obviously,” Farlan hurries to assure her, “though I suppose it does mean we won’t be in mortal danger anymore – on account of you, at least.”

Nanaba and Levi share a look as soon as Farlan turns away; hers is comforting while his, no doubt, is exasperated at best. The noises the man makes as he starts getting breakfast ready wake Isabel, who stretches her arms above her head in the bed and yawns widely, scratching at the tangled red mop of her hair.

“Big brother,” she exclaims, lowering her voice when she continues, “Did you know there’s a giant in the sitting room?”

Nanaba has to cover her mouth to keep herself quiet, and even Levi chuckles before blowing his nose.

“Can I go look?” Isabel asks now and Levi nods.

“Be quiet. He needs to rest,” he warns her as she sneaks out on tiptoes, coming back a minute or so later with a look of pure amazement on her face.

“Is he your friend, Nan?” she asks Nanaba who nods.

“Very special too,” she adds with a smile.

You wouldn’t guess it from the way she behaves when Mike finally limps into the kitchen and gives them all a wordless nod as he sits down heavily next to Isabel, who pinches her lips together anxiously; it’s only then that Levi notices the dark red stains on the right leg of his trousers. Levi can see the man following Nanaba with his eyes, but she seems to barely notice him even when she places his breakfast on the table in front of him soundlessly but, Levi thinks, almost aggressively. She ignores his grateful nod and turns to Levi to ask about whether they have anything to dress wounds with. Before Levi has a chance to reply, Farlan gets up and brings over their supply of bandages.

“I thank you, but I don’t need it,” Mike says quietly, his voice so low that Levi can barely make out the words.

Nanaba turns to him with an icy stare and starts hissing at him in French; to Levi it sounds like she’s repeating a score of the choice expressions she’s been teaching Farlan and Isabel. He exchanges a few glances with the two, guessing from their expressions they’ve understood at least some of it. Mike looks at her glumly while she’s speaking, finally bowing his head and continuing with his breakfast after a meekly whispered, “Oui”.

“Thank you,” she says in German again, turning to them and smiling. “These are all very helpful.”

“Thanks,” Mike says as well, lifting his gaze from his plate to sweep over them; Levi can see Isabel shifting in her seat excitedly.

Farlan nods without speaking, still casting looks at Mike, who has continued devouring his breakfast. The silence in the room feels thin and expectant, and it takes Levi a moment to

realise they've all stopped to stare at the tall man who seems to notice only when Isabel speaks up.

"How tall are you?" she asks, peering at his long legs under the table.

"Almost two metres," he tells her and she turns to look at Levi as if to confirm the stranger isn't lying. "How tall are you?"

Isabel shrugs. "I don't know," she admits. "Are you taller than Erwin?"

Mike nods and Isabel leans her elbows on the table, pushing the palms of her hands against her cheeks.

"I wonder what it's like to be so tall," she says in a faraway voice. "I bet it would make it easier to work on a farm."

"It does," Mike agrees and Isabel turns to him sharply.

"You've worked on a farm?" she asks enthusiastically, but Nanaba interrupts their conversation before Isabel can ask anything further.

"You can continue this later," she promises her gently. "Right now the giant's wounds need tending to."

Isabel nods solemnly, turning back to Mike. "Do you want some of my medicine?" she asks him. "It always makes me feel better – like everything felt before they killed everyone."

They all seem to freeze at this and none more so than Nanaba, whose hands stop in the middle of their task of going through the supply box. It seems to Levi that Isabel is completely unaware of the effect of her words. For a moment they're all at a loss for things to say until Mike shakes his head.

"Thanks," he says, giving a small smile that might as well be the first Levi's seen, so rarely does he seem to do it. "You should keep it. It doesn't hurt that much."

"Alright," she simply states, getting up from the table. "I'm going to Frau Gernhardt's."

Levi and Farlan both nod; the sound of the door closing sends Farlan to his feet and leaves Levi thinking about Isabel's earlier words.

"I should go too," Farlan says. "The shopping isn't going to do itself."

"I'll bring back something from Erwin's tonight," Levi tells him, "so that'll be us set for tomorrow."

Farlan nods curtly and places his teacup in the sink, but Nanaba stops him before he has a chance to gather his things.

"I was wondering..." she starts, looking a touch embarrassed as she glances at Mike who's untying the laces of his boots, looking up suddenly at Nanaba's following words. "Can I talk

to you both alone for a second?”

Farlan and Levi share an inquiring look and follow her into the sitting room where she turns to them, wringing her hands.

“I have to admit, I do not like asking you this,” she starts, turning to Levi, “but I was wondering if you could go with Farlan now.”

Her words leave Levi speechless for a few seconds before he nods.

“Good,” she replies and sighs. “I wanted to ask also... Could we use your bed?”

Farlan and Levi turn to look at each other with expressions of bewilderment that Levi guesses are nearly identical. “Err...” Farlan starts, sounding as confused as Levi feels. “I suppose?”

“I know it must sound strange,” Nanaba begins her explanation, “but you see, we have not ever had a bed to use before.”

It takes a moment for Levi to realise what it is she’s asking and when he does he turns instantly to Farlan, whose cheeks have gotten a bit of colour.

“I will change and wash the sheets of course,” she promises hastily, “but we do not make much mess. We mostly use our hands.”

Farlan’s eyebrows have all but disappeared under the floppy strands of hair falling over his forehead but he nods emphatically nonetheless. “Of course, yes,” he finally promises and Levi nods along though the thought makes him uneasy. “We’ll just... leave you to it.”

“Thank you – again,” Nanaba says, looking noticeably relieved. “Time apart is difficult. I was not sure he was still alive.”

Farlan takes her hand in his for a moment and when he says he knows what she means, Levi can be sure he’s not lying. For a moment his thoughts fly to Erwin and how few in number their days together now measure, but something in his mind keeps the thought at bay, like some part of him is still pretending.

When Levi and Farlan finally return after several hours of standing in queues, the only sign of Nanaba and Mike’s frolicking are the sheets soaking in a large bucket in the corner of the kitchen, and the way whatever tension was there between them before seems to have disappeared. Nanaba takes over the cooking – as another form of thank you, Levi suspects – and when she places Mike’s small portion in front of him, she even leans in to whisper something in his ear, something that makes him smile and chuckle quietly.

When he gets into bed with Farlan that night, Levi is still trying not to think about it, focusing instead on his evening spent with Erwin. They looked at maps, of where Erwin is going, of where everything is – things Levi never learned, or simply never learned to remember. They looked at the photograph together too, and Levi told Erwin things he still has left of his mother and of Kenny: how sometimes she used to give him small pieces of bread soaked in sugared milk, or how his uncle taught him how to fight after he got his first beating at school.

Kenny never seemed to mind that it got him into trouble with teachers – from what Levi has gathered, Kenny himself barely knew how to read and count, and though he never spoke of it much, it was always clear to Levi the man didn't hold any sort of schooling in very high regard.

They all get a scare a few days later when Frau Schultz turns up at their door early in the morning, waking them up and sending them scurrying through the apartment. Levi takes Nanaba's place on the sofa, thinking the pretence of him having just woken up there must look even more believable than he may have hoped. In the end it turns out Frau Schultz only wanted to borrow a basket for shopping, having broken the handle of her own the previous day. When Levi walks back into the bedroom, he finds both Mike and Nanaba with weapons in hand, and even after he explains the situation, they seem far more alert than before.

And Levi can hardly blame them: the wound on Mike's leg is taking much longer to heal than either one of them thought – Levi can gather as much from their whispered conversations and the worry on Nanaba's face when she changes his bandages. With the party and their departure approaching, they finally make the decision to relocate to Erwin's apartment and leave along with him on the early hours of the new year. The goodbyes are an unceremonious affair: just a simple question from Isabel as she wonders whether they'll ever see each other again.

"I would like that very much," Nanaba tells her as they fall into an embrace.

"Please don't die."

Levi can just make out the whispered words that form a contrast with the smile Isabel draws hastily on her face as soon as they break apart. For a moment it looks as though Nanaba is about to say something, but in the end she simply smiles back at the girl, and somehow Levi knows it's because she doesn't want to make a promise she can't keep. As they slip soundlessly out of the apartment, Levi can't help but think what a shame it is for Isabel to lose her company. During the weeks Levi has watched them grow closer and their whispered conversations have made him wonder whether Isabel has been sharing her secrets with Nanaba, told her things she's never been able to talk to Levi or Farlan about. Knowing how much it can help, talking about things, Levi hopes it's the case.

Nanaba and Mike's presence in Erwin's apartment cuts Levi's next visit short despite his counting of the days and hours they still have left, the rapidly diminishing reserve of future moments, new touches and kisses and shared stories. Every time Erwin brushes his knuckles softly against Levi's cheek makes him shudder, every softly whispered word fills him with an anxious dread. Walking around the apartment, Levi is already picturing it lifeless and empty, filled with nothing but silence and his own thoughts, Krieger and Kenny and his mother's corpse.

Time seems to move faster as Sunday draws nearer and the day itself slips by without Levi fully taking notice as he prepares for the party and their departure, sorting through his things

and helping both Isabel and Farlan sort through theirs. He tells them not to bother with anything unessential, but when he notices Isabel packing her U-Boats and Farlan his letters to Christofer, he says nothing about it. Besides the photograph Levi has nothing more personal than his clothes to take with him and in the end his things take up far less space in their luggage than either Isabel's or Farlan's.

When the first guests arrive everything is in order even by Levi's own standards; though he can't be sure they'll ever return here, he can't stand the thought of leaving a mess behind, so the floors are scrubbed clean and the cupboards organised, their sparse collection of books dusted and alphabetised, and the linens in their beds changed. They've laid out the food on the kitchen table, everything they've been able to put together: a score of small meatballs – for which Farlan spent the whole morning chopping up offcuts of pork – and slices of sausages, sauerkraut and pieces of pickled cucumber, a potato and carrot casserole topped with a thin sprinkling of cheese as well as a plateful of dry oatmeal biscuits filled with a special treat – raspberry marmalade.

Frau Gernhardt is the first to arrive, bringing with her a small basketful of sweet buns filled with raisins.

"It didn't feel right not bringing anything," she explains as Farlan protests, out of politeness more than anything else.

The rest of the guests start arriving little by little, Frau Schultz with her daughter, Herr Schild with his, even some of Farlan's acquaintances from the shop queues whom Levi didn't know he had invited. The last to arrive is Frau Niemeyer, who walks stiffly into the apartment – the cold makes her hip ache, she reminds them yet again, like every year – and Levi is more than a little dismayed to see she has brought Böhmer with her. He welcomes them both nonetheless, even if Böhmer's badly concealed curiosity as he takes in the apartment sends a shudder down his spine. Looking around himself at all of their neighbours, Levi feels a wave of relief for not having to fake his cough, even if it is getting much better already. It takes him a moment to realise it hardly matters now one way or the other, that by this time tomorrow they will be gone, and though the alternative seems to Levi much more like a prison, he can't help feeling relieved for not having to keep tiptoeing around these people any longer.

After so many years of their calm, cloistered existence, it feels strange to Levi to see the small apartment full of people, the quiet suddenly moved aside by talk and laughter as introductions are made and news exchanged. Frau Niemeyer and Herr Schultz – the oldest two people at the party – have found a quiet corner to sit in, while everyone else has huddled into a group, talking about how wonderful it has been to spend Christmas time free of air raids. Levi nods along wordlessly and observes the people around him, smiling a little when he sees Frau Schultz's daughter eyeing Farlan with apparent interest.

It's clear from the first that being a host is much more his area than Levi's, and the way he slips effortlessly from conversation to conversation, never forgetting to remind people to try the food, makes Levi remember what he said about how he'd make a very good woman for this very reason. Levi in turn soon finds himself manning the kitchen sink, doing the dishes as they start to pile up once everyone has had a chance to sample most – if not all – of the modest assortment of foods. Whenever one of the serving platters starts to look empty, he

runs down into the basement to fetch more, nearly sighing with relief every time the door closes behind him and muffles the sounds of their guests.

By the time Erwin arrives at a quarter to nine, the party has already gone on for several hours, plenty of time for Levi to grow sick of it, though only once has he allowed Farlan to exile him from the kitchen to make polite conversation that seems to take much more of a toll on him than running up and down the stairs all night. When Levi finally lets the man in and hurries to help him with the record player, a silence falls on the room the like of which Levi didn't expect. Glancing at Erwin as he takes off his hat and nods politely at everyone present, Levi suddenly realises how much of it must be due to the uniform.

"Good evening," Erwin wishes them all with a smile, which is answered by many, and the women in particular; Böhmer, on the other hand, looks more sour than ever as he eyes Erwin.

"Good evening," Frau Schultz hurries to exclaim. "You must be the famous Herr Sturmbannführer we've all heard so much about."

Levi hears the slight strain in Erwin's laughter as he carries the record player over to the desk and plugs it in.

"I suppose that takes care of the introductions," Erwin says and utters another laugh that makes Frau Schultz's cheeks grow scarlet.

Levi keeps stealing glances at Erwin as the man goes around shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries, and somewhere in the back of his mind he feels a sting of annoyance at having to share their last day together with these people. For a moment he wonders what he'd rather be doing instead: lying in bed like they did on that lazy Sunday, giving each other pleasure and talking, falling asleep with their limbs entangled. The thought is both bliss and torture, and Levi abandons it almost as soon as it crosses his mind. From behind himself, Levi can hear Erwin's protests as Böhmer salutes him.

"Please," Erwin says, sounding more than a little uncomfortable "there's really no need for that."

"My apologies, Herr Sturmbannführer," Böhmer replies and laughs. "I suppose my training has gotten the better of me – again."

"Understandable, I'm sure," Erwin remarks with a polite smile before spotting Levi by the record player and excusing himself.

"You were supposed to be here at eight," Levi mutters, accepting a bag that Erwin hands over.

"I'm sorry. I was... delayed," Erwin explains quietly, shaking his head a little when he sees the worry on Levi's face. "Nothing serious. And see? I even remembered to bring some records and not just the player."

"A miracle for someone your age," Levi retorts in a whisper, smiling as Erwin lets out a quiet chuckle.

“Now now,” he scolds Levi gently before looking around himself and assuming a more appropriate tone of voice. “Where’s Friedrich? I have something for him.”

“Try the kitchen,” Levi instructs, and when he follows Erwin a few minutes later – after leaving the record player in the capable hands of Herr Schild – he finds him and Farlan eyeing two bottles of clear liquor that have appeared on the table. They’re discussing something with Frau Gernhardt and a young woman from the shopping queue Levi recognises as Rosalind.

“Are you sure you can spare the apple juice?” Farlan asks Frau Gernhardt who waves her hand, dismissing the comment.

“Don’t worry, I can always get more from my mother-in-law,” she assures him. “So we’ll use the juice and the liquor and...”

“Ooh! Do you have any tinned fruits?” Rosalind asks excitedly. “I heard from a friend that the syrup goes well in a punch, gives it a bit of sweetness. You can put in some raisins too, if you have them.”

Farlan turns excitedly to rummage through the cupboard, pulling out a tin of preserved peaches as if it were an enemy flag he has won from the conquered. While the three of them get busy over fetching punch bowls and glasses and mixing liquids, Levi takes out two glasses and lets Erwin fill the bottom few centimetres of each, gulping down all of the liquor; it burns his throat and he coughs, wordlessly asking for a refill.

“Could we perhaps keep this as is?” Erwin asks Farlan, who nods while separating the sugar syrup from the halved peaches.

“I suppose you men need something to drink as well,” Frau Gernhardt says with a smile that Erwin is quick to answer.

“I’m sure the punch will be delicious,” he replies, “but since it’s my last night in the city I’m in the mood for something a bit stronger.”

“You’re being sent out?” Frau Gernhardt asks to confirm, growing serious at Erwin’s nod. “I wish you the best of luck out there, Herr Sturmbannführer.”

“Please,” the man corrects her sweetly, “call me Erwin.”

Levi can’t help throwing back his drink a touch more aggressively than he planned at that.

“Erwin,” Frau Gernhardt repeats, smiling again. “Like I said, I do hope your luck holds – until all this is over.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind,” Erwin tells her just as music starts carrying in from the sitting room where Levi follows Farlan as he announces the punch.

“I think it’d be appropriate to make a toast for the new year,” Böhmer speaks up over the chatter once they all have drinks in their hands and they fall quiet – someone even turns off

the record player. “And I hope Herr Sturmbannführer – or our hosts, of course – won’t mind if I say a few words.”

“Not at all,” Erwin says while Levi and Farlan both merely shake their heads.

“Despite the disgraceful false rumours we’ve all heard of late,” the man starts, looking so pompous that for a moment Levi entertains himself by imagining slapping the drink out of his hand and into his face, “–of which I will say no more than that they are blatant lies, and anyone who repeats them as truths is a traitor in my book – I have no doubt that this coming year will be the Reich’s most glorious one yet!”

Levi dares a look at the other guests, many of whom he thinks are passing uneasy glances around the room. Erwin’s composure never fails, and the smile pulling at his lips looks as genuine as any he has given Levi in the past.

“Well, without keeping any of us any further,” Böhmer says and raises his glass. “To a prosperous new year, and the thousand year Reich! Heil Hitler!”

“Heil Hitler,” they all repeat though with much less fervour than Levi would have thought; he can even make out Erwin’s low voice beyond Frau Niemeyer’s loud croaking.

The music starts again, though the song is cut short by Rosalind and her friend rushing in to change the record. Levi recognises the new tune after a while – the one Erwin and Lilian danced to at his party all those months ago. It seems like it’s been such a long time since Levi has spared the night even a thought, but remembering it all of a sudden makes him wonder what has become of all those men who were present then; with any justice in the world they ought to all be lying face down in a ditch somewhere.

“Do you know the tango, Herr Sturmbannführer?” Levi can hear Frau Niemeyer asking behind him.

“Yes, I do,” Erwin admits. “Would you like to join me for a spin?”

Frau Niemeyer bursts out in a throaty laughter. “Does Herr Sturmbannführer want me to break my hip?” she asks and laughs again. “My meaning was that you ought to dance with Frau Gernhardt. Such a shame when a fine young woman like her doesn’t get to dance at a party like this.”

Levi glances back to see Frau Gernhardt shaking her head, blushing furiously. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly inconvenience–” she starts, but Erwin cuts her short.

“I would enjoy that very much,” he says, offering her his hand. “May I have this dance?”

Levi hurries to help Farlan get the sofa out of the way, but as Erwin pulls Frau Gernhardt against himself, he slips back into the kitchen to clear the pile of dishes again, also remembering to take a peek into the bedroom, where Isabel is entertaining the children with scary stories. He takes a few swigs of the liquor before walking out to the bathroom where he runs into Farlan, falling with him into an uncomfortable silence that reminds him painfully of the rift between them that neither seems capable of mending.

“Everything seems to be going well,” Levi remarks and Farlan nods with a sigh.

“Yes, well. It’s not the most exciting party but then, when was the last time any of us went to one anyway?” he says before lowering his voice down to a whisper. “Is Erwin staying?”

Levi shrugs to mask the pang of anxiety he suddenly feels as he remembers the time, how close it is to morning. “I don’t know,” he tells Farlan, who sighs again, this time irritably.

“I just want you to know,” he starts, pausing for a few seconds to draw a breath. “I just want you to know that... I can sleep on the sofa if–”

“Don’t start with–”

“Shut up for a second and let me finish,” Farlan cuts him off, in a hiss of a whisper. “He’s leaving in a few hours. I never–”

Farlan’s voice breaks and though in the dim light of the stairwell it’s difficult to tell, Levi thinks his eyes have grown misty.

“I never had that,” he finally continues, wiping his nose on the sleeve of his jumper. “I didn’t get a long goodbye – in fact I barely got a short one. And I know you and I haven’t...” His words trail off again for a moment. “Well, I wouldn’t want to be the reason you don’t get that with him.”

The words make Levi ache as his breath hitches in his throat. Suddenly his lungs feel too small and his hands itch to punch something, to make the pain physical, tangible and familiar. For a moment everything Farlan warned him about re-enters his mind in such clarity and definition that Levi can barely understand how he can have ignored it for so long. In a second of panic he realises he’s still not thought to look past the following morning, past the months spent in hiding, and suddenly it seems a form of insanity to believe they will ever meet again, that Erwin will ever return to Dresden, that his missions and his loyalties and priorities won’t pull him away into a different direction and a different country; back home.

“Thank you,” Levi manages, clearing his throat. “It’s... I don’t really know how to–”

Suddenly he feels Farlan reaching for his hand and pulling him into a quick embrace; he can smell the alcohol on the man’s breath but it doesn’t make the gesture any less meaningful. Levi thinks of Nanaba’s words about how the secrets he keeps make Farlan lash out, and he tries to understand that frustration, what it must be like to rely on someone without being able to trust them. They break apart and, at a loss of things to say, continue rather awkwardly each to their own tasks, Farlan back to the party and Levi into the bathroom where, as he relieves his bladder, he notes dully he has forgotten to pack his things from the cupboard. He decides to make an effort to remember, but by the time he enters the apartment again, he’s already forgotten.

For the next hour Levi tries to entertain himself by keeping an eye on which gets consumed first, the punch or Erwin’s strength on the dance floor. He catches the man in between songs when he comes into the kitchen to steal a few hasty swigs off the bottle only to be talked into yet another tango or waltz or foxtrot by one of the ladies present, all of whom seem to be

agreeing on who gets to go next behind Erwin's back. When Levi does his rounds in the sitting room gathering up the dishes, he can't help following Erwin from the corner of his eye: so steady and so graceful, the redness of his cheeks as likely due to the alcohol as the dancing by then. In his arms the women look near weightless, laughing at the things he says and, Levi thinks, pressing their bodies closer than is absolutely necessary. When he catches Rosalind moving in his direction, Levi slips hastily back into the kitchen, relieved beyond words when she doesn't follow him there.

The only ones to leave before midnight are Frau Niemeyer and Böhmer, the latter of whom seems to have grown ever more sour as the evening has progressed. The pair wish them all one more happy new year and heil Hitler before clambering down the stairs; Frau Niemeyer in particular seems to have enjoyed the punch, and Levi doesn't doubt she'll need all of Böhmer's help to get safely back to her apartment. It seems their departure works to dispel all the remaining awkwardness from the group, as if their mere presence held an unspoken judgement that was enough to keep everyone on their toes.

"I swear to God, if I have to watch you butchering one more waltz, Frau Schultz, I am going to lose my mind," Farlan suddenly exclaims; Levi's tried to keep count of how many glasses of punch the man has emptied, but as he looks at the blush on his face, it's clear he ought to have saved himself the trouble.

Frau Schultz looks offended, but not dangerously so. "Who raised you, young man? A pack of wolves?" she counters, straightening her pearls as Farlan waves his hand and puts on another record, a slow waltz Levi feels he's already heard half a dozen times during the evening.

"If you're ready for a partner worthy of your talent, Herr Sturmbannführer," Farlan calls out to Erwin and holds out his hand.

Erwin glances around himself like calculating the mood of the assembled crowd, taking in Rosalind and her friend, who seem to hardly be paying attention, and Herr Schild and his daughter who are chatting with Isabel, freed from her childminding duties as Hanna and Bruno have fallen asleep in the bedroom. In the end he deems it worth the risk, taking Farlan's hand in his and answering the man's theatrical bow with the same. Levi watches them as they assume the position and begin, gliding through the room like skaters on ice, oddly well-proportioned for this despite the difference in height.

"Where on earth did you learn to dance like that, Herr Meissner?" Frau Schultz asks, looking around herself as if trying to see whether she is the only one who is surprised.

"My brother Günther had a school dance once." Levi is relieved to see the lie falls effortlessly despite the alcohol. "He was a dreadful dancer, but there was a girl he liked and wanted to impress, so I learned the women's steps to teach him."

"It's different between brothers, of course," Frau Schultz says, a new disapproving edge to her tone, "but I'm not sure this is appropriate. I'm actually surprised you would go along with something like this, Herr Sturmbannführer."

“Oh, it’s just a bit of fun,” Farlan exclaims, laughing as Erwin spins him around. “Besides, I simply had to see what all the fuss was about.”

“Not a disappointment, I hope,” Erwin states, and Farlan pauses to consider.

“Out of the two men I have danced with in my life, you’re certainly the better,” he finally decides just as the final notes of the song die out, leaving the room full of the rattling humming of the needle running around the record. They bow at each other again, both breathless and laughing, making Frau Schultz shake her head.

“I suppose you two aren’t the first ones to do that,” she mutters, “but I can’t really say it sits right with me.”

“We might be fighting a war,” Farlan tells her, “but it’s not an excuse to start taking things so seriously!”

Not long after this their guests start to leave, first Herr Schild and his daughter followed soon by Frau Schultz and hers. After a fond farewell to Isabel, even Frau Gernhardt decides it is time she got Hanna and Bruno to their own beds; Erwin helps her carry them downstairs to keep them from waking. Rosalind and her friend are the only ones left, gathered around the kitchen table with Farlan to drink up what’s left of the punch; watching them pour out every last drop from the bowl before Frau Gernhardt took it with her made Levi realise how desperate they all must have been for this: a few hours’ worth of oblivion. Taking pity on them, Levi pours a splash of the liquor into each of their glasses before walking out into the sitting room where Erwin joins him, falling onto the sofa like his body is suddenly boneless.

“What time is it?” Levi asks him and takes a swig off the bottle before passing it to Erwin.

“Coming to half past one,” the man tells him after a quick glance at his wrist watch; January 1st.

They drink in silence and Levi is certain they’re both doing the same thing, wordlessly counting the hours they have left, and suddenly it seems ridiculous that Levi would have ever thought of this separation as temporary. When he looks at Erwin now he knows it’s for the last time. After all, even if they both survived, what could there be for them? What corner of the world would welcome them, would leave them in peace, to grow sick of each other in their old age? Their eyes meet and the pretence dies; suddenly life is a handful of hours.

As Rosalind and her friend clamber tiredly out the door, Erwin gets to his feet too, walking over to the record player and putting on a song; a few seconds of the needle rattling before a piano starts playing, soft, pleasant, tempting. Erwin crosses the room slowly, stopping in front of Levi as a woman starts to sing, holding out his hand. Just as Levi is about to tell him that he doesn’t dance, has never danced and isn’t about to start now, Erwin utters one simple word.

“Please.”

The man’s hand feels warm against his skin as Levi takes it, just as it always has, and when he pulls Levi closer he can smell the familiar scents of cigarette smoke, sweat and lavender.

His feet feel clumsy, he doesn't know where to step until Erwin whispers his name and he relaxes into the touch, wishing that instead of following Erwin around the sitting room, he could follow him onto the train, to the front, wherever Erwin goes. On the record the woman is singing her thanks to a lover, singing out a devotion that makes Levi ache, gives words to what he feels: Wenn die ganze Welt sich gegen dich auch stellt, wenn alle dich verlassen dann werd ich bei dir sein.

Levi presses his forehead against Erwin's chest, tries to feel the steady beating of his heart, hands clasp Erwin's suddenly so tightly that the man asks what's wrong. And how could Levi ever find words for it, how wrong it is that they should have met just to part when Levi's finally started to let go, to trust what it is they have? So he shakes his head and tries to focus his mind on the music, the sweet words hardly more than a bitter reminder now: Ich will mein Leben für dich geben, und bricht es in zwei, was ist schon dabei?

"Levi." Erwin's whisper is low and resonant, his words so sweet they make Levi's throat ache. "I want all of you."

Levi shivers, but doesn't speak, listening to the song, thinking of the words he knows he can't say: Ich bin dein, nur dein.

"I want..." Erwin's words trail off and as the song plays its last, Levi can hear him swallow. "I want all of your pleasure."

Levi keeps leaning onto Erwin's chest, imagines the man's heart beating wildly, like the confession has made him as nervous as Levi himself feels. He takes a moment to consider the choice, only to realise there's none to make, not tonight, not anymore.

"It's been a long day," he mutters, glancing up at Erwin in passing. "We should go to bed already."

"Yes," Erwin agrees. "We should."

As Erwin leaves to visit the communal bathroom, Levi gathers up the rest of the dishes and carries them over to the sink, starting to run the water before Farlan takes over.

"I'll take care of this," he says surprisingly sternly. "You go say your goodbyes."

Levi glances at Isabel asleep on her bed for the last time – she'll get a few hours of sleep before they have to go – and suddenly the small kitchen feels more like home than it's ever done. His gaze meets Farlan's and something wordless passes between them, something of the life they've built here, the years before Isabel, all the way back to that first night when they still knew nothing about each other, not even names that were given and not invented.

The sound of a knock breaks the moment as Farlan turns back to the dishes and Levi leaves the kitchen, thinking he should have told Erwin to take a key with him. Catching a glimpse of the uniform as he pulls open the door, Levi decides it to be the first thing he'll take care of, the first thing that goes. For a few seconds he thinks it's the dim light of the stairwell that makes the fabric look black, until a closer look drowns his body in a cold panic. It doesn't look black. It is.

Krieger.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language

I'm not as big a monster as some of you think I am and therefore will not leave you hanging forever for an update. The part b of this chapter will be up very soon. This was the "special" part of this update.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Here's the other part of the previous chapter. Hopefully you'll enjoy it. As I said in my previous notes I don't have deadlines for the summer so keep your eyes and ears open for the next chapter and news about posting.

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!
I'm also on [Twitter](#).

A special thanks to [Mikoto](#) for being amazing beyond words because of [this](#).

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

For a moment that feels like several minutes Levi can only stare, fear clawing at his chest and numbing his hands, making his mouth dry as he struggles to breathe. The man stands in front of him, unsteady on his feet; drunk, Levi realises in a flash, remembers all those times when that was a sign of trouble, thinks how it's more a sign of trouble now than ever before. His eyes meet Krieger's; the greedy glint in them makes him shudder, like it did the day they met all those years ago, and Levi takes a step forward to narrow the gap between the door and its frame. His mind is humming, like the only thing that can pierce through the panic is a wish for Krieger to vanish, to never have come here, not now, not like this.

"What are you doing here?" he asks Krieger in a hasty, anxious hiss, thinking about Isabel and Farlan in the kitchen, thinking about Erwin. He can feel his palms itching as they begin to sweat.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" the man asks, burping quietly under his breath. "I got a leave just for this."

"You shouldn't have come," Levi tells him, shuddering at the hint of desperation in his voice. "I don't know what you think you've come here for but—"

"You didn't write back," the man says, far too loudly for Levi's liking. "All those letters I sent you, told you how I feel and you—"

"Of course I didn't write you any fucking letters," Levi growls, his mind still reeling, trying to settle on anger rather than fear as he follows Krieger swaying back and forth at the threshold, his greasy hair falling over his eyes.

“You don’t look happy to see me, Levi.”

“Don’t call me that.” The name hits him like a jolt to his body and makes him snarl, “You have to go. Don’t come here again.”

As if Levi never spoke the words, Krieger throws his weight against the door as he’s about to close it, his face showing suddenly nothing but the rage he concealed so badly before. Levi manages to keep his hold on the handle even as Krieger tries to push through the gap.

“I didn’t come all this way for you to treat me like this, Levi,” the man tells him, and he flinches again.

“I told you, don’t call me—”

“What’s the matter?” Krieger says, raising his voice to a half-shout that makes Levi panic. “Aren’t you proud of who you are? Aren’t you proud of your dirty Jewish—”

Without knowing what else to do, Levi grabs the man by the collar of his coat and pulls him into the apartment, closing the door with a bang that echoes in the stairwell. He turns to Krieger who looks smug beyond words as he glances around himself before unbuttoning his coat and dropping it on the floor. Levi looks at the bundle of fabric and struggles to believe any of this is real, that Krieger is in his apartment, that he has shown up after months of silence on this of all nights. Levi tries to think, tries to come up with any way he could make the man disappear, to force him out, to ensure he’ll keep his mouth shut, but he finds no solutions, nothing except—

“Lukas?”

Levi turns around to see Farlan standing at the kitchen door, the plate and towel in his hands revealing how unsteady they are. He glances anxiously at Krieger whose gaze has become fixed on Farlan, measuring him from head to toe before his mouth splits into an eerie grin.

“What’s going on?” Farlan continues, his gaze travelling between the two, and again Levi finds himself speechless, paralysed.

“One of your friends, *Lukas*?” Krieger asks mockingly, taking a few steps toward Farlan, who backs away instantly. “I have to admit it’s a cosy little rat nest you two have built for yourselves.”

“Are we in some sort of trouble, officer?” Farlan asks now, his hands gripping the plate so hard his knuckles have turned white.

“Looking at the two of you I can’t picture who’s fucking who,” Krieger says, turning back to Levi and ignoring Farlan’s question. “How is it, Levi? Do you let this scrawny little shit fuck you? Do you bend over for anything with a cock? Hmm?”

“Sir, I don’t know what you think is—”

“SHUT UP!”

The plate falls onto the floor with a crash that Levi barely registers, his focus on Krieger who lunges forward and drags him into the sitting room from his arm, taking revenge on the punch Levi throws hastily on his jaw by closing his hand around Levi's throat and shoving him hard against the bookshelf. Somewhere beyond the fight to keep breathing Levi can hear Farlan shouting for Krieger to stop, following them in and fighting to keep Isabel from running past him.

"Are these the kind of games you've been playing behind my back? Hmm?" Krieger snarls at Levi, leaning in so close Levi can smell the sickening unwashed sweetness of his breath. "Is this why you haven't replied to my letters?"

Levi's hands tear at the fingers around his throat aimlessly before clenching into fists again; the second hit crashes hard against Krieger's temple and the hold around his throat eases for long enough for him to free himself. He falls on the floor, crawling on his hands and knees to get out of the man's reach, still gagging and coughing when he fights to get to his feet again. Beyond the ringing in his ears Levi can hear the heavy thumps of Krieger's boots as he closes in on him, but something stops him dead in his tracks: the sound of someone else entering the apartment.

They all fall quiet, listening to the sounds carrying in from the entrance; the door being opened and then closed quietly and locked, the key being placed on top of the small chest of drawers by the coat rack. Levi can already see Erwin from where he's standing, but as the man walks into the sitting room his eyes fly instead to Krieger, who is staring at Erwin, his mouth falling open under the unkempt moustache like he can barely believe what he's seeing. Levi can feel himself growing calmer, following Erwin as he crosses the room in long, steady strides, walking straight to Levi without giving Krieger so much as a glance. He stops right in front of him, his back to Krieger, and leans closer and down; suddenly Levi can feel something heavy being slipped into the pocket of his trousers.

"I'm here if you need me," he mutters so quietly only Levi can hear before straightening his back and walking over to the sofa, sitting down and throwing one of his legs over the other, his eyes starting to move around the room, observing, measuring, planning. Levi can see him taking in Isabel and Farlan by the entrance and passing over Krieger, again as if he barely notices him. Levi lets out the breath he hasn't realised he's been holding and clears his throat, rubbing at the sore skin of his neck.

"What the fuck is this?" Krieger speaks in a hollow whisper, eyes narrowing as he looks from Levi to Erwin and back. "I should have known you'd be on your knees for someone else as soon as I fucking left. I bet my train hadn't even left the station before you had him halfway down your filthy cock sucking—"

"That's enough of that," Erwin interrupts him calmly but sternly. "If you don't know how to talk in civilised company I suggest you keep your mouth shut."

As Krieger turns to Erwin, Levi slides his hand slowly into his pocket, feeling for whatever Erwin placed in it, his heart hammering wildly as his fingers brush against the firm handle and the cool fraction of metal he can feel above it. He looks across the room at Farlan and Isabel who stare back at him, uncertain and afraid, and he's trying to think of a way to get them out, knowing any second now Krieger might take notice of their presence again. He

gives them a nod he hopes is reassuring, one he's sure he wouldn't believe himself, guilt twisting his gut as he realises this is merely a consequence of his own actions. While Krieger's attention is still on Erwin, Levi pulls his hand back out of his pocket, feeling dizzy from the frantic beating of his heart.

"You think you can tell me what to do?" Krieger says, catching Levi's attention as he takes a brave step toward Erwin. "You think just because you were the last out of the two of us to fuck him you can tell me how to talk to him? Hmm?"

"There's something in your question that is undoubtedly true," Erwin responds, looking so at ease he might as well be sitting in a park on a Sunday afternoon, making polite conversation with some old lady who has come there to feed the pigeons.

The words make Krieger's face grow red with an anger that seems to make his body swell up as he turns to Levi. "You fucking bitch," he growls. "I should have known better than to stick my cock in a filthy son of a—"

"I thought I told you," Erwin interrupts him again, the tone of his voice growing colder, "that's enough of that."

Krieger turns to face him, breaking his connection with Levi again, his lips spreading into a gleeful smile. "Oh," he says, the words dripping with mockery. "You don't like to hear about that? Hmm? Hasn't he told you how he used to come to me every week like clockwork, begging for me to help him and his little rat friends?" He pauses for a moment to glance at Isabel and Farlan. "We had a lot of fun in those days. You should have heard the way he begged me to suck his cock."

Levi feels a surge of nausea in his throat as he lifts his gaze to see Erwin, whose lips are slightly parted as if he's been about to speak before something has made him hesitate. Levi can see the hint of a frown lining those thick brows, and the sudden confusion in his expression is enough to make Levi cringe, until Krieger's following words catch his attention.

"I used to fuck him so hard he'd bleed and shit the bed," the man says, so proudly no one can doubt he thinks of it as an accomplishment. Levi doesn't know which is worse, Farlan's quiet gasp or the way Erwin flinches at the words. "At first it was like fucking a virgin every night – the way he squealed like a pig being slaughtered when I stuck my cock in him – but after a while he was such a good boy about it, always knew what to do without being told."

Levi feels his breath falling short. The pain that Krieger's words have caused seems to be alive in his body, making his limbs numb and his chest burn with shame and anger until he fears his heart will stop from it. He can't look at Erwin, can barely lift his gaze from the floor to glance at Isabel and Farlan; he's lifted his hand to cover his mouth and he looks as though he might be sick.

"I think your name did come up – once," Erwin tells Krieger, and it seems to Levi his persistent composure angers Krieger much more than any open hostility would. "From your reaction to my presence I gather he didn't mention me. I assure you, we were already very well acquainted before you left."

Krieger's expression slips another little bit closer to madness. "You think I don't know who you are? Hmm?" he hisses. "You think I don't recognise you? Cheapskateführer Holtz, the limp-dicked cocksucker from the Personalhauptamt who can only come if someone's shoving pennies up his—"

His words are cut off when Erwin utters a dry little laugh. "I think there's at least one thing in that description that Levi could easily disprove," he says, leaning his arm on the backrest of the sofa and glancing at Levi with a smile.

Paired with the shame still burning in his chest, the words make Levi frown and shudder as his eyes dart back to Farlan and Isabel; standing behind the man she looks younger than Levi's ever thought her, bare legs poking out of her nightshirt, her expression showing confusion and a kind of anger Levi hasn't seen before. It takes him a moment to realise that the thing she's holding in her hand, half-hidden behind Farlan's back, is a small knife, and Levi knows the only thing stopping her from throwing it at the intruder is Farlan's steely grip on her arm.

"I of course know who you are – professionally speaking," Erwin continues making conversation as Krieger stays quiet, stunned into a rage-fuelled silence by the man's earlier statement. "I remember your record very well, Herr Krieger."

"Is that supposed to intimidate me?" Krieger asks him and Erwin laughs again.

"It's not me you should feel intimidated by," he merely says.

Krieger's expression grows perplexed for a moment as he turns to look at Levi and bursts out laughing. "You don't mean him?" he asks Erwin incredulously. "You think someone like me has anything to fear from a scrawny Jew rat like him?" The glance he gives Levi is full of contempt. "I know all the things his kind are good for."

Levi hasn't realised pushing his hand back into his pocket until he feels his grip around the razor growing tighter but even that is nothing compared to how hard he is gritting his teeth against the fury that swells in his chest. It makes his ears ring, it blurs his vision, it grows with every thought that crosses his mind, all the humiliation Krieger ever put him through, all the things he's said now that Levi never wanted Farlan and Isabel to know, that he never wanted Erwin to know. Back at the cottage he told Erwin they had an agreement, Krieger and him, and that is all he ever wanted to say, all he ever wanted to reveal about what Krieger did to him.

He thinks bitterly back to the dance he shared with Erwin, the man's tender words, how this night was supposed to be spent: happy, for the last time happy to be close, to be held, to give and receive pleasure – acts that wouldn't have required such trust and bravery to begin with if it weren't for Krieger. And now the man is here, taking it from Levi like he tried to take everything else; his body, his pride, his name. Levi thinks of all those ways in which he's fought to get them back, how long it has taken him to succeed, and he knows how he wants this to end – finally and permanently.

"What the fuck do you think you know about it?" Levi growls, surprised to hear how rough his voice is, how much Krieger's grip around his throat has done. "Just because you think I'm

only good for that doesn't make it true."

"Are you sure you want to say that, Levi?" Krieger asks him, sneering dismissively. "Hmm? Maybe if you hadn't been spreading your legs for *him* to keep your miserable life the second I left, someone in here might take you seriously."

"You appear to have grossly misjudged the situation," Erwin tells Krieger, as polite as ever. "There's no agreement between the two of us – save to enjoy the pleasure of each other's company."

Krieger's eyes narrow as his gaze moves between them, and Levi shudders as he realises the man doesn't want to believe it, doesn't want to think Levi would sleep with Erwin for no other reason than because he wants to.

"You're lying," he finally snaps. "He's not told you, but he only keeps coming to your bed because he's weak, because I haven't been here to—"

"I assure you, 'weak' is the last thing Levi is," Erwin states, his voice low and serious; it makes Levi's breath hitch in his throat. "On the contrary, he's the strongest person I've met in my life."

Krieger starts to laugh again, an ugly, throaty sound that dies quickly under the severity of Erwin's expression. Levi can see his breathing growing heavier as he grows angrier, feels the sting of his stare even after he turns to look at Erwin.

"You don't know anything," Krieger finally says. "*I* knew him already back in Berlin. Did you know that? Hmm? Used to go to that little shop his uncle had just to watch him stack the shelves. That's how long I've known him. Since he was fifteen years—"

"I was seventeen, you piece of shit," Levi snaps, his anger nearly making him shake, "and every time you came into our shop I wanted to bash your head in with a can of soup."

"Don't you fucking lie to—"

"My uncle *loathed* you," Levi tells him; the words pour out like water from a broken dam. "We never had much in common but *you* were one thing we could agree on. He kept a cup behind the counter just so he could spit in it every time you—"

"DON'T LIE TO ME!"

Levi flinches at the sound but what catches his attention better than Krieger's heavy panting – and even better than the suppressed sob Farlan lets out – is Erwin. Though to anyone else it may seem like the man has barely moved, Levi catches the small change in his posture and the new alertness in his eyes. Like someone had flipped a switch in his brain, Levi suddenly understands what Erwin has been doing, talking to Krieger, hinting to what he has with Levi. He was never simply making conversation, never trying to establish himself as anything over the other man. This is what it has all been for: to make Krieger angry, to make him rash and irrational, more likely to use blunt force and charge toward Levi without thinking. His eyes meet Erwin's and the constant calm he finds in that blue lets him draw a steady breath.

Suddenly everything is clear, what must happen now; the one question still remaining is whether Levi will be able to do it.

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” Erwin tells Krieger coolly, pulling out his cigarette case and lighting a smoke. “You have grossly overstayed your–”

“And I thought I told you to stop telling me what I should do!” Krieger barks angrily, little drops of saliva gathering onto his moustache as he turns to Levi again. “How dare you lie to my face like that, you ungrateful little–”

“Did you ever consider he might be telling the truth?” Erwin interrupts the man yet again and takes a long drag off his cigarette.

When Krieger turns his attention back to Erwin, Levi’s eyes are drawn again to Farlan and Isabel; they both seem rooted to the spot. He thinks of all the blood – it’ll be brutal no matter how you look at it – and knows he doesn’t want them to witness it, to see that side of him even now. He tries to think of some place they could go, but knows anywhere outside the apartment would be dangerous, would raise questions. They could leave the room, but the thought of drawing Krieger’s attention to them makes Levi decide against speaking out. Instead he nods toward the kitchen, trying to get his message across, but Farlan’s eyes are glued to Krieger and Isabel merely stares back at Levi with a kind of defiance that lets him know he’s wasting his time.

“You need to shut your mouth before I shut it for you,” Krieger hisses at Erwin, pointing one of his sausage-like fingers at him. “What do you think you’re trying to do? Hmm? To protect *him*?”

“Absolutely not,” Erwin counters quickly. “Levi doesn’t need me for that. He is more than capable of taking care of himself – and others. Your friend Osterhaus learned that lesson too, before his untimely end.”

For the first time since Erwin walked in Krieger looks taken aback. “What was that?” he asks Erwin, who takes another deep breath off his cigarette.

“Hadn’t you heard?” Erwin asks back, exhaling the smoke slowly through his nose. “Osterhaus is dead. Shot by a sniper outside the Semperoper.”

The litany of swears that erupts from Krieger’s mouth makes Erwin laugh quietly; the sound makes Levi shiver, and he remembers how his thighs grew numb from the frozen roof tiles as he lay in wait, how the cold metal of the trigger felt against his fingers, how precise the hits were when he finally made them: chest, throat, head.

“I suppose you *had* heard rumours of his little scheme to arrange safe travels out of the Reich for a select few individuals,” Erwin comments. “I truly wish I could say I’m part of the reason your plans have fallen through, but it was Levi’s mission from start to finish.”

Levi glances quickly at Farlan, who looks back at him, perplexed, and for a moment Levi thinks it shouldn’t make him feel good, to remember things like that.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Krieger snaps, casting a glare at Levi before coming back to stare at Erwin. “What mission?”

“To kill Osterhaus,” Erwin explains slowly. “Of course he had *some* help, but he carried the main responsibility of both planning and executing it. I suppose the results speak for themselves, but I can’t help voicing again how thoroughly proud I am.”

Levi snorts a quiet laughter that feels inappropriate; it draws Krieger’s attention.

“You?” he asks, his voice suddenly quiet though still full of doubt. “You killed Osterhaus?”

“Three clean shots,” Erwin goes on, drawing Krieger’s attention once again. “You should see him with a rifle. It’s truly awe-inspiring.”

Krieger’s eyes shift madly between the two of them and it seems to Levi as though he’s trying to decide whether they’re both lying or not. When Levi sees the hint of fear in the man’s eyes, he knows it’s time for the final push, and just by glancing at Erwin’s expression he can tell he’s seen it too.

“I’d like to think I’ve taught you well,” Erwin says to Levi with a fondness in his voice that Levi hasn’t heard since they danced.

“I couldn’t have wished for anyone better,” Levi tells him, and somehow the words feel like a goodbye.

“You’re both out of your fucking minds,” Krieger blurts out in a hollow whisper. “What do you mean you’ve taught him? Hmm? What do you mean he killed Osterhaus?”

“All I really did was provide him with something to focus his anger on,” Erwin says. “Osterhaus was... Well, he made for a good target.”

The disbelief seems so deeply etched on Krieger’s face now that for a moment Levi can’t remember him ever having had another expression. “Are you both insane? Hmm?” he asks, raising his voice as the fear in him starts to take over. “I’ll report you both. Tonight, I’ll report you, I’ll...” He turns his squinty eyes on Erwin. “Do you know what they’ll do to you? Hmm? They’ll shoot you on the yard of the Gestapo headquarters. I might even ask them to shove the rifle up your arse before firing. Yes, it would suit you, you fucking...”

His words grow quiet, turning into incoherent mumbling. From the corner of his eye Levi can see Erwin slowly putting out his cigarette.

“And you,” Krieger spits at Levi. “You fucking Jew cunt! I always told you didn’t I? I always told you what would happen if you crossed me.” He stops to heave a few shallow breaths before starting to pace back and forth. “You’ll be on the first train east – that’s what I told you. They’ll send you to Auschwitz and burn you alive, you dirty Jew bitch. You’ll be nothing but a pile of ash, just like your uncle and your whore of a mother. And you’ll deserve it, you all deserve—”

“No.”

The word stops Krieger dead in his tracks and he turns to look at Levi, his hands clenching into fists; for a moment the only sound in the room is his heavy panting. “What did you say to me? Hmm?” he asks Levi who stands firm, locking Krieger’s gaze with his own.

“You think I don’t know what’s in the east?” Levi asks him back, closing his hand around the razor. “You think I don’t know what you’ve done?” He takes a few steps closer to Krieger. “I’ll only fucking say this once so listen carefully. I know what’s in the east, Krieger, and I will not be sent there. Not by you, and not by anybody else.”

For the first time in his life Levi feels it: a complete absence of fear.

He looks at Krieger, his breathing as calm and easy as Krieger’s is short and laboured, his hands as steady as Krieger’s are shaking with rage.

“You fucking dare talk back to me like that? Hmm?” the man whispers. “You ungrateful piece of Jew filth! After everything I’ve done for you. Hmm? All I’ve ever done is love y—”

“No,” Levi says again, gritting his teeth. “You won’t ever say that to me again.” He takes another step closer. “It’s the most repulsive thing I’ve ever heard in my fucking life.”

Levi counts three seconds of calm before Krieger lunges toward him, hands reaching for his throat; big and clumsy, not fast enough, just as Erwin told him the day they met. A few steps and Levi’s slipped past him, pulling out the razor at the last second to slash quickly behind Krieger’s knee, putting weight and strength behind his hand, making sure to feel bone beneath the blade. Krieger falls down, his scream of pain muffled by Levi’s hand as he clamps it over the man’s mouth, pulling his face up to reveal his neck. He hesitates for a second, glances at Erwin as the man stands up from the sofa, and slashes a deep cut across Krieger’s throat; he can feel the man’s panic gurgling out onto his palm with the blood, can feel the frantic movements of his body, can feel his touch as his hands come up to claw at his torn flesh. Levi lets him fall face down onto the sitting room floor; he lands with a resolute thud, thrashing for a moment before growing motionless, limbs askew, his body contorted in an awkward angle that makes him look not quite human, and Levi can’t help thinking how easy it all was in the end, how terrifyingly, sickeningly easy.

“Oh God.” Levi can hear Farlan gasp before he starts to whimper, “What have you done?”, repeating the words over and over and over until Erwin stops him.

“Quiet now, Farlan,” the man tells him gently before kneeling down on the floor next to Levi; the soft touch of his hand on Levi’s arm makes him look up from the pool of blood, brings him back to the moment. Erwin leans closer, finds Levi’s gaze and whispers, “Are you alright?”

Levi nods, brushing the back of his hand against his forehead and drawing a deep breath. “Yes, I...” He lets Erwin take the razor from him and watches him wipe down the blade with a handkerchief. “Yes.”

Erwin’s hand comes up to Levi’s neck, the tips of his fingers rubbing against the stubbly undercut, warm and tangible, grounding before brushing against the red welts around Levi’s neck gently. He helps Levi to his feet and leans closer to look him in the eye again.

“We haven’t much time,” he says and Levi nods, trying to focus his mind on what’s important now. “We need to—”

“I know,” Levi interrupts him, staring at the corpse on the floor. “How do you reckon we’ll—”

“I’ll fetch Mike and Nanaba,” Erwin tells him calmly. “They’re still at the apartment.”

“Using your bed?”

Erwin laughs and the sound makes Levi think he shouldn’t have made the joke. “I think it’s very likely,” the man admits, the tone of his voice growing serious again. “Mike’s familiar with disposal. They’ll take care of it as they go.”

Levi nods and sighs, surveying the blood that’s running along the floorboards. “I’ll start cleaning up,” he mutters, flinching a bit when Erwin lays his hand on his shoulder.

“It shouldn’t take me longer than an hour,” he whispers; Levi knows he means the words to be soothing, but they don’t quite pierce through the numbness he feels. “There’s no reason we can’t get this done if we move fast.”

“I’ll get things ready here,” Levi promises him and, thinking about the sound of people walking back and forth in the stairs, adds, “If anyone wakes up, they might just think we’re having more guests over.”

Erwin agrees in a hum. “It’s good this happened on New Year’s Eve,” he says. “Though admittedly it would have been better had it not happened at all.”

Levi lets out a snort of laughter. “Glad to know my luck’s still holding,” he remarks dryly, pushing against Erwin’s hand as the man runs his fingers through his hair.

“I won’t be long,” he promises again; before he pulls on his winter coat and gloves, he stops to hand something over to Farlan, giving Levi one last glance as he exits the apartment.

Levi presses the palm of his clean hand against his forehead and draws a shaky breath, turning away from Krieger’s body and walking past Isabel and Farlan, knowing there’s nothing he can say to them that will make this any better. He marches over to the sink, losing track of time as he scrubs at his hands to get them clean, only stopping when he hears soft clinking sounds from behind himself. He looks back to see Isabel gathering up pieces of porcelain; the plate Farlan dropped on the floor. Realising it’s better for her to stay in the kitchen, Levi leaves her to it, filling a bucket at the sink and gathering up some towels before returning to the sitting room.

Farlan has moved over to the sofa from where he stares at the body, ashes from the cigarette in his shaky hand falling softly onto the floor as he smokes; they’re good for the nerves, that’s what Erwin said, and Levi hopes now that he was right about that. He takes out a long bandage and starts wrapping it around Krieger’s neck, just like he saw Mike do to the man Erwin killed – what was his name? Mandl? He rolls the body over, his mind empty as he looks at the wide-open eyes before pushing the lids to cover them. He returns to the kitchen for an empty bucket for the towels, knowing they’ll soon grow heavy and sticky with blood.

When he walks back into the sitting room he finds Isabel on her knees, running a dry rag around the floor by Krieger.

“Go back to the kitchen,” Levi tells her, but she shakes her head stubbornly.

“We need to get this done before Erwin gets back,” she tells him, looking up defiantly. “Right?”

Levi stares at her for a few seconds before sighing, not finding enough strength within himself to keep arguing. They start mopping up the blood together but after a while Levi realises his hands have stopped moving the towel and his gaze has become fixed on Krieger, the hair that looks like it hasn't been cut in months, the moustache that seems to have been hastily groomed. There's dirt under the man's fingernails; everything about the body under the blood-soaked uniform looks poorly handled, thin and worn, and Levi knows they're all signs of life at the front.

“All those...” Farlan starts, making Levi turn to look at him, his words trailing off as he puts out his cigarette and lights a new one, barely managing from how badly his hands are shaking. “All those things... Those vile, disgusting things that man said...” Their eyes meet and the pain in Farlan's makes Levi cringe. “Are they true? Was he...”

Farlan's words trail off again and Levi knows he doesn't need to speak to confirm what the man has said. He gets back to the cleaning instead, listening to Farlan's broken gasps for a moment before turning around to see the man running past him, grabbing the empty bucket and vomiting into it loudly. He watches in silence with Isabel as Farlan empties his stomach, leaning his shaking hands against the floor, tears falling down his face as he fights to catch his breath.

“I'm sorry,” he mutters, wiping at his sweaty face as he struggles onto his feet. “I'm sorry, I didn't want to—”

“Go sit down,” Levi tells him and Farlan obeys, falling back onto the sofa and lighting another cigarette. “Empty and wash the bucket and go sit with him,” Levi tells Isabel in a whisper that makes her protest.

“But I want to help—”

“Go,” Levi interrupts her and she does as she's told, leaving the apartment for a moment before coming back to sit down on the sofa next to Farlan, taking his hand in hers. They sit there quietly for a while as Levi continues scrubbing the floors.

“What are we going to do, Levi?” Farlan finally asks, his voice hollow and rough. “Everything's ruined. The plan—”

“We're going to do exactly what we said we would,” Levi tells him sternly. “Erwin and I will take care of this.”

“How?” Farlan insists; he's forgotten about his cigarette, which hangs uselessly from between his fingers, shedding ash onto the floor. “How are you going to take care of this?”

How are you going to make *this* go away? How are you going to pretend like you didn't just..."

Levi can hear the quiet realisation in Farlan's voice as his stubborn silence makes the man's words falter.

"It's because you've done it before, isn't it?" Farlan whispers at Levi's back; he doesn't turn to look. "You've done this before, haven't you?"

"Farlan—"

"Who were you talking about before? Who is Osterha—?"

"Stop it," Levi hisses at him, throwing the blood-soaked rag into the bucket. "I told you we're taking care of it, that's all you need to know so keep your mouth shut and let me get on with it."

He grabs the bucket and leaves the room; when he returns with fresh water, Farlan has lit another cigarette and when Levi passes him a plate for the ashes, he accepts it without so much as glancing up from his lap, and something about his pose makes Levi think he's trying not to see the body that Levi now begins to clean. He wipes the blood off Krieger's face, neck and hands without thinking, without seeing what it is beyond the tainted skin that used to be human. Right now all that exists is the dirt, the smears of red on the rapidly cooling body that need to disappear before Erwin gets back. When he finally starts to wash his hands, the small bar of soap he's bought with their ration stamps has diminished into a small piece the size of the tip of his thumb, and by the time he's done cleaning under his nails, he's not sure if the little flecks of red still remaining are Krieger's blood or his own.

When the key finally rattles quietly in the lock, Levi has taken a seat next to Farlan and Isabel, where the sound brings him back to the present again. He hasn't noticed staring at the corpse; his gaze has grown slack and his mind blank, and only when he rubs at his eyes does he notice how badly all the hours spent not sleeping have started to sting. He looks up when Erwin enters, nodding a reply to the wordless question on the man's features before getting to his feet, flinching as Isabel speeds past him to throw herself at Nanaba as soon as she's past the door.

"Everything's ready," Levi tells Erwin and Mike as they walk into the sitting room, nodding at the corpse at which they also turn to look, "though I don't know what to do with all that blood on his clothes."

"Nan," Mike calls out in a whisper. He's wearing one of Erwin's uniforms under his leather jacket; the fabric clings to his thighs like it's about to burst at the seams. "Bring the coat."

Nanaba picks Krieger's coat up from the floor and runs it over, standing by Levi and watching Erwin and Mike fight it on the corpse.

"Disgusting, isn't it?" she says, nodding at Mike. "Seeing him in one of those turns my stomach."

“Not the right time for that, Nan,” Mike tells her quietly, trying to get one of Krieger’s stiffening arms into the sleeve of the coat.

She sighs and turns to Levi. “Good, clean job,” she compliments him with a smile. “Most people I know who prefer guns are absolute butchers with a knife. No art, no skills, but you...” She pauses to peer down at the body. “Not bad at all.”

Levi nods wordlessly, not knowing what to say other than to ask, “Will you be alright?”

She smiles and nods back at him. “Do not worry. We have done this many times,” she assures him. “He’ll be halfway down the Elbe by the time anyone thinks to miss him.”

Levi nods, watching Erwin’s hands as he buttons up the coat and turns up the collars to cover the bandage before straightening his back, sighing tiredly as he turns to Levi and whispers, “You’ve got all your things?”

Levi nods, glancing at Farlan and Isabel who sit on the sofa, following it all without saying a word. “We’re ready to go when you are.”

They gather up their meagre belongings as Mike hoists Krieger’s body onto his shoulder, adjusting it so it doesn’t disturb his balance. They set out quietly, Farlan carrying his suitcase and Levi carrying the rest, Isabel hanging onto Nanaba’s hand until the last possible minute, nearly making the woman drop the record player she’s balancing under her arm. The building is so silent as Levi locks the door behind himself that even the shuffling sound of their feet makes his hair stand on end.

They’re on the first floor landing when a sliver of light ahead stops them on their tracks; Erwin takes the lead quickly, wary as he walks down the rest of the steps to the ground floor, where he’s greeted by a familiar voice.

“Is that you, Herr Sturmbannführer?”

Erwin approaches Frau Gernhardt’s door with a sheepish posture. “My apologies if we caused you to wake,” he whispers graciously as the rest of them continue down the stairs. “Some friends of mine arrived a touch late to the party and well...” He turns to glance at Mike who has reached the ground floor. “Not all of them handled their alcohol as well as one may have hoped.”

“Oh, you didn’t wake me. I was just...” Her words trail off as her eyes follow Mike and the limp body on his shoulder out the door. “I couldn’t sleep and I heard something in the stairwell so I...”

Even in the dark Levi can see her eyes fixing on Isabel, who waves at her from Nanaba’s side. Frau Gernhardt’s thin brows draw into a frown for a moment before she smiles again at Erwin.

“I’m sorry,” he apologises again, “but we really must get going. We all have trains to catch and it seems my friends will need a ride home as well.”

“No, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t keep you,” she says at once, starting to close her door; Levi is already at the entrance when she calls out softly, “If I could just... have a quick word with you, Herr Weller. If you don’t mind.”

Levi looks onto the street where Erwin is packing the trunk of the car and Nanaba and Mike are trying to fit everyone – the corpse included – onto the backseat. For a moment he considers telling her they can talk when he comes back, but something in her expression makes him cross the few metres to her instead.

“I’m not sure how to say this,” she starts in a hasty whisper. “I don’t know if it’s all in my head, if any of this makes any sense, but earlier at the party...” She pauses to examine Levi’s features, looking hesitant and concerned. “There was something in the way you and Friedrich behaved that made me think you’re...” She stops to shake her head. “I shouldn’t say any of this, I know I shouldn’t but I got the feeling you’re not coming back.”

Levi can feel his breath hitching in his throat as he turns to look at Frau Gernhardt, meeting her gaze and falling speechless.

“I just wanted to...” she starts again, biting her lip as she searches for words. “If there’s anything you need, any kind of help or assistance I can offer you...”

Levi can hear the doors of the car being closed outside and he glances through the entrance and onto the street, catching a glimpse of Erwin before he walks out of sight.

“I don’t know what you would need,” Frau Gernhardt admits hurriedly. “Someone to provide an explanation for when people start to wonder where you’ve gone, maybe? Someone to start rumours about–”

“Yes,” Levi whispers carefully. “That’s... Yes.”

She looks at him, eyes dark and misty as she takes his hands in hers. “Trust me,” she gasps. “I won’t let you down, just...” She stops to draw a quivering breath. “Please, take care of Isabel.”

“Yes,” Levi promises. “I will. I’ll make sure–”

“We need to go,” Erwin tells him, stepping into the building.

Levi lets go of Frau Gernhardt and gathers up his things, giving her one last nod before following Erwin and throwing his bag into the trunk before climbing onto the backseat next to Farlan and Nanaba, and Krieger’s corpse that is half-lying on top of them. He looks around to find Isabel, discovering her sitting on Mike’s lap; her expression has grown distant again and there’s a slackness in her posture that tells Levi she’s ready to fall asleep.

They drive along the street and double back, travelling parallel to the river for a few kilometres until most of the main city has fallen behind. It’s where they leave Nanaba and Mike; the parting is quick, just a hastily whispered goodbye before they’re already continuing back toward the busier banks of the Elbe and across it. Levi can see Erwin glancing nervously at the fuel gauge as he leaves them at the entrance to the basements before

continuing driving around the block. They scurry down the steps and in through the heavy metal door, huddled together in the darkness before Levi lights a torch.

They take off their shoes before starting to cross the rooms, not even whispering as they sidestep furniture not to leave a sign of their passing presence. When they reach the right building they stop to wait, only walking up to the entrance hall when Erwin opens the door. They hurry along, trying to be as quiet and quick as they can as they rush up the stairs in their socks, wishing that the heavy falls of Erwin's boot-clad feet will mask any sounds they make. When they reach the second floor landing, a telephone starts to ring downstairs, making them all jump and Farlan almost drop his suitcase; by the time it stops, they're already in the apartment.

None of them says a thing as they hide their shoes in Erwin's wardrobe, now half-empty; Levi folded most of his uniforms into the suitcase the last time he visited, and even then he didn't realise what it meant, didn't allow himself to think about it. Erwin has drawn all the curtains over the windows and while their eyes get used to the darkness they move slowly, the heavy woollen socks they've pulled on muffling the sounds of their feet. Levi unpacks their things and places them in the wardrobe and into the chest of drawers; there's nowhere left for them to go, so trying to keep their possessions hidden in case of an inspection of the apartment seems useless. Behind him Farlan climbs into the bed; Levi can hear his badly suppressed snuffles until Isabel joins him; whatever she whispers, she does so too quietly for Levi to hear. By the time he's done unpacking their suitcases, they're both fast asleep.

Levi finds Erwin in the kitchen, a pot and two cups on saucers in front of him on the table; he joins the man without a word, letting him pour out the tea but leaving his untouched. His stomach is twisting, he feels sick and aching and drained as he watches Erwin, all his movements so precise, like he's afraid of letting something through, of showing something he knows he can't control.

"What's the time?" The words are barely formed in the whisper that escapes his lips against his better judgment – but he has to know, can't go another second without knowing–

"Near quarter past four now."

The pain Levi feels at these words nearly makes him lift his hand to his chest to soothe it, as if that primitive form of comfort could ever ease even a fraction of that ache, that panic, that emptiness spreading into his body. Is this all it has come to? Some fifteen minutes out of the hours they were supposed to have, were meant to have, the hours that could've brought him some semblance of peace, something to hold on to, something of Erwin to keep with him for the days when he'll miss him, the years when he'll wonder why it would have been so wrong for them to have more time. He looks across the table, meets Erwin's gaze – not steady now, he can't do that for Levi anymore – and suddenly the only thing that matters is being close, as close as they can, if only for some dozen minutes of something that could never suffice; a hateful substitute for the years, decades of his life Levi wants to give.

They stumble into the pantry, hands pulling at clothes and hair, fingers clawing at belt buckles and buttons. Their lips meet, painfully, violently, there's nothing left of the softness they had before, of the gentleness, of the peace they've found with each other against the odds. When Erwin falls onto his knees Levi tears at his hair, desperate for his presence and

the heat that turns to nothing as soon as he finishes, soundless and shivering and feeling sick to his stomach. Levi lets Erwin turn him around and spread the mess from his mouth onto his thighs before pushing between them, pulling Levi onto his toes to better reach him. He stares at the hand Erwin has placed against the wall, feeling the other one forming a fist around his shirt, digging into his stomach as Erwin presses closer. He comes fast, after a score of hasty thrusts and a half-swear that leaves him panting against the back of Levi's head, finally, it seems, as lost for words as he is. They break apart but Levi doesn't turn around, not even when Erwin leaves the pantry, not even when he hears the sound of the door closing in the distance. He lets it bring him onto the floor, his trousers still halfway down to his knees as he leans against the shelves and breathes; the only thing left in the silence.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- extremely foul language
- graphic mentions of sexual abuse and rape
- violence
- death
- sexual content

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Life has been unfair over the past month, it's really kept me in a tight grip but finally I've been able to get a breather to finish this chapter. The next one isn't too far off either. I need to thank so many people, again for art and again for such amazing comments and response to my Dresden but atm I am half-asleep, typing this cross-eyed and ready to drop so I will try my best to mention you wonderful people in the next chapter notes. Thank you, all of you.

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I'm also on [Twitter](#).

WARNINGS AT THE END

-h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi pulls the old kitchen scale from the cupboard and weighs out the dried peas again before marking down their weight onto a piece of paper. He is still peering down at it when he walks quietly to sit at the kitchen table, scribbling down division after division: if the war lasts another year, if Marie can only visit once every three weeks, if she'll only be able to bring a dozen potatoes and a handful of beans, if the price of food goes up, if the number of ration stamps per family is reduced... He writes down all the hypotheticals as they occur to him, everything that can go wrong, before reducing all of their daily portions by another five grams. He marks the new amounts down on the sides of the paper bags before leaving the kitchen.

"Oh, not this *again*," Farlan tells him in a barely audible whisper after he's knelt down next to the sofa to inform him of the change. "You just cut the rations yesterday."

Levi frowns, trying to remember, but the days are melting into each other, every one of them the same; if it weren't for the slivers of dim winter light slipping past the heavy folds of the curtains, Levi would have lost track of the change between night and day a long time ago. He's fairly certain it was the day before yesterday when he last weighed the peas, but letting Farlan know that doesn't seem worth the effort of whispering, and he lets it go.

"We need to be careful," he mutters instead. "We don't know—"

"Yes, yes," Farlan sighs, picking up the book he's laid against his chest. "We don't know how long we'll have to be here for, or how much food we'll end up getting from Marie. You've told me all of that before, but if you keep reducing our rations I'll have nothing left to cook with soon."

Levi gets to his feet without saying anything further, crossing the room and sitting soundlessly in the armchair, only then realising he's been avoiding it ever since they started living here. He looks at Farlan, the way he's lounging on the sofa, the book resting on his chest, and wonders at how calm he is, how utterly at peace he seems to be with all of it. He glances at the bookshelf and wonders how many tomes Farlan has left, and whether it's that way in which he immerses himself in the text that makes him appear so relaxed, and whether running out of things to read will change all that before the end. He can see Farlan flinching at the sound of footsteps in the stairwell – Levi and Isabel have grown used to them already – but his eyes never lose their place on the page. There isn't much that carries into the apartment, and somewhere in the back of his mind Levi feels as though he's categorised the various noises, learned to tell the neighbours apart from the way their feet fall on the steps, from the heavy pacing of the porter to the quick skipping of the little boy who lives with his mother on the first floor.

Levi turns to look around the room, his gaze fixing on the secretaire and the clock they've placed on top of it for a moment before he moves on, staring at the thick curtains and longing again to pull them aside, to be able to catch a glimpse of the city beyond and to see the gathering dust fall onto the floor, ready to be wiped away. In the darkness the rooms seem smaller than they used to, not comfortable in their humbleness like they were before but cramped and squalid. Even the ceilings feel like they're lower than they used to be. Levi forces his thoughts further back, to his childhood and the less painful memories of squalor he finds there.

He sighs as he gets back onto his feet and starts his daily exercise, savouring what he knows to be a very fleeting strain on his muscles. In the two weeks they've spent here – give or take a day, Levi isn't sure whether he's remembered to mark them all down – he's learned to do it all and barely make a sound: slow, controlled movements, all the better for that. By the end his mouth is always a tight line, his breathing wheezing and panting but falling always without so much as a grunt. Farlan told him he's started losing weight, but Levi himself feels all he's lost is a bit of softness around his limbs and waist.

He wipes his sweaty face on his shirt as he walks into the bathroom to wash himself, relieving his bladder but not flushing the toilet – the sound is unthinkable – before turning toward the sink. It seems strange to him now how he never noticed the loud groaning of the pipes before. It took him by a very unpleasant surprise that first morning after he finally managed to get up from the pantry floor and begin cleaning the mess off his thighs. Having to be careful with using the spouts and drains, Levi hasn't been able to fill his days with quiet cleaning like he hoped; even keeping themselves washed has proven to be a struggle.

He dips half of a small towel into the enamel washbowl – the cool water barely covers the decorative lily-of-the-valley pattern on the bottom – before running it over a bar of the lavender soap: the smell is nothing but Erwin to him. Levi runs the towel over his body, taking deep breaths to remind himself, the only time he allows it even though everything here makes him think of Erwin, could make him think of the man if he'd let it. Rubbing at the insides of his thighs he remembers it, the force behind those thrusts of Erwin's hips, the way the touch of his lips stayed the back of Levi's neck before he pulled up his trousers and left. Levi thinks Erwin's hand lingered on his shoulder then, like he was reluctant to let go, but now Levi can't tell if it really happened or if he simply wishes it had. Suddenly that same

emptiness he felt then forces Levi to stop; he can feel it filling his chest and catching him by the throat, barely eased by the heavy sigh he lets out.

He finishes washing himself and sets the towel down to dry before sneaking into the bedroom, almost leaving at once until he sees Isabel looking at him from under the covers. He lies down next to her instead, careful not to make the bed creak as he brings his face close to hers.

"Is it day or night, big brother?" she asks him in a whisper, stretching out her body as he tells her it's daytime.

"You should get out of bed," he says to her quietly. "Just walk around a little bit. Help us with the cooking."

Isabel pulls her arms out from under the covers and nods hesitantly, to Levi's relief. "Is Farlan awake?" she asks in a mousy little squeak.

"He's reading in the sitting room," he says. "Maybe he'll explain one of the books to you again today."

"Maybe," she replies, though they both know Farlan doesn't like to. And who can blame him, with the way the whispering strains all their throats?

"You need to wash up too," Levi tells her, cutting off her protest. "You do, and change your clothes. It'll make you feel better."

"What for?" she asks and sighs. "Who's going to care if I wear the same thing until we get out of here?"

"I will, once you start to smell," Levi explains, bringing his face even closer to her and taking a deep breath through his nose. "Which you do already."

"I don't," she counters, flashing him a quick smile. "*You* smell. You smell like a dead rat."

Levi ruffles her hair and sits up, turning to look behind himself. "You remember what I told you?"

She sighs again and says, "Yes. 'Don't use too much soap and don't pour any of the water into the sink.'"

Levi gives her another smile before getting to his feet and stretching his arms above his head and walking back out into the sitting room, picking up a comb from the chest of drawers along the way. He takes his place in the armchair, clearing his mind as he starts to stare at Farlan again aimlessly, his page-turning the only thing that's happening until he sighs and lets the book fall open on his chest.

"You're staring again," he tells Levi in a mumble. "I told you, it's distracting me."

"Sorry," Levi mutters back as Isabel walks in, dressed and clean but looking distressed as soon as Levi points at the spot of floor in front of the armchair, where she sits down

reluctantly nonetheless, letting him begin the gruelling task of combing through her hair; just something to do, a pretence of not being useless.

“Farlan,” she whispers across the room; they’ve all become good at that, hearing and listening. “Will you tell me another story tonight?”

Farlan looks over at them and for a moment he looks as though he’s going to refuse, but in the end something makes him change his mind. Levi guesses it’s the way Isabel flinches as the teeth of the comb get stuck in a tangle – one of a hundred it seems, though her hair is fairly short. In the end he simply nods and goes back to his book, but Isabel interrupts him again soon.

“Are we having pea soup for dinner again?” she asks him.

Before he can answer a sound breaks out that makes them all sit up on their seats: sirens in the distance. It’s only the second time it has happened and Levi can feel his breath catching in his throat and he doesn’t even realise to apologise to Isabel for pulling her hair painfully with the comb. For a moment they all look at each other, like waiting for someone to say it’s probably just a false alarm, but the sound of footsteps scurrying down the stairs makes Levi’s blood run cold, and he knows the others feel it too. Farlan’s face has grown pale and he looks as though he’s about to be sick whereas Isabel has tensed up in front of Levi, like a scared animal that doesn’t know how to escape danger. Without knowing what else to do, Levi pulls her to her feet and plants her on the sofa next to Farlan, taking a seat on her other side.

“It’s probably nothing,” he says, a little more loudly than he intended. “It’s probably just a false alarm.”

They both nod along with his words but don’t speak, perhaps not finding it in themselves to agree with him out loud. Levi shifts closer to Isabel, taking her hand in his and reaching over to place the other one on Farlan’s shoulder. They stay huddled like this as the sirens scream, and suddenly to Levi the sound is almost comforting – for as long as it’s the only sound he can hear. His ears strain to pick up anything other than Farlan’s laboured breathing and the hollow echoing of a heavy door being closed in the distance, but there’s nothing, for so long there’s nothing that he starts to ease his hold on Isabel’s hand, only letting go at the first sign of that dreaded humming that makes him spring to his feet and run to the window.

He peers through the gap between the curtain and the wall, looking out and up to the sky, trying to see the source of the low droning sound but catching nothing against that pale blue. The buzzing is louder here and keeps growing stronger as Levi stands, frozen in place by the soft noise, eyes searching frantically–

“What’s happening out there?” Farlan asks in a whisper that sounds much less panicked than Levi would have thought.

“I don’t know,” Levi tells him truthfully, his heart hammering in his chest. “I can’t see anything, but...”

His words trail off when he realises what he’s been about to say: he knows they can hear it too, knows they understand what it may mean, what it may bring with it as it draws closer

and closer.

“What should we do?” Farlan asks now, still holding on to Isabel. “What are we supposed to—”

Levi shushes him quiet in a desperate attempt to keep him from insisting, to keep himself from having to give an answer. After all, they all know there’s nothing they can do, nowhere they can go. Were they to leave the apartment, all they could hope to do is find a public air raid shelter, but Levi can’t name any one closer than the main railway station; even if it weren’t housing refugees, the walk would make it a fool’s errand. He looks behind himself at Farlan and Isabel and knows they can see the reply in his eyes; it makes them even more scared than they were before, and when Levi crosses to the sofa again, he can hear Farlan letting out a quiet sob. Next to him Isabel looks worried, but to Levi it seems she’s almost more worried about Farlan than about their situation. He sits down next to them and searches for words but minutes pass and he finds nothing.

“They might just fly—”

Just as Levi’s begun his sentence that terrifying sound erupts outside, the sound they’ve been waiting for through all those hours in the basement: the low rumbling of explosions in the distance. Levi jumps to his feet again and runs to the window and this time Isabel and Farlan both follow him. Levi pulls the curtain back just enough for them all to be able to peer outside; he can feel his armpits itching with sweat as his gaze bounces between the buildings.

“I can see smoke, look,” Isabel finally gasps, pointing at a wisp of a cloud in the distance, black and growing as they watch.

When Levi feels Farlan clutching his arm, he knows the other man has seen it too. “Oh God,” he breathes. “They’re actually bombing the city. They’re actually...”

Levi tries to estimate the direction the smoke is coming from – the west, perhaps, though Levi can’t think of anything so important there that it would merit an attack. Levi feels Farlan’s fingers digging into his arm, the tremor of his hands as they watch the column of smoke rising up into the sky, and the low humming in the horizon tells Levi more planes are on the way.

“What are we going to do, Levi?” Farlan whispers, turning away from the window, his face pale but his words as steady as his hands are not. “We have nowhere to go.”

Levi can hear it in his voice, how the statement is all the answer there is: they have nowhere to go, no way to avoid the bombs should they start falling on the building. Without saying a word, Levi takes them both by the hand and pulls them away from the window, walking them through the apartment and into the pantry, where they sit down on the floor while he closes the door behind them. He takes a seat next to them, shuffling closer as Isabel pulls on his arm. The noise of the planes is barely audible here, the explosions just a whisper compared to what they were before. They huddle together and Levi tries not to give in to the panic in his chest, tries not to think about what might happen, tries not to think about the last time they were together here, the last time he held him close, the last time he heard his name whispered in the dark.

“Whatever happens,” Farlan whispers, his voice strained and hoarse, “I want you both to know I’m so grateful. I could never have... I could never...”

Isabel’s eyes are full of the kind of sadness that leaves Levi breathless as she looks at Farlan and pulls him closer by the front of his shirt, pushing her forehead against the soft spot between his shoulder and his chest. Levi places his hand gently on her back, feeling the frantic flutter of her breathing in the way her body rises and falls under his touch.

Levi can’t tell how long they’ve spent sitting in the pantry shivering against each other until he finally ventures out, walking to the window as the air raid sirens call out again. He can hear other sirens beyond it, calling out for people to help with the fires that are still filling the sky with black smoke when he peers out through the curtain – but people are emerging from their basements, gathering onto the street and into their windows to gaze at the signs of destruction in the horizon, and Levi lets the drapes fall back in front of the windows.

“Do you think there’ll be more of this now?” Farlan asks him in a whisper that’s even more quiet than usual, and Levi can tell he’s hoping Isabel won’t hear. “Do you think there’s any chance we’ll be safe here now?”

“We’ll be as safe in here as we would be anywhere else,” Levi tells him under his breath, finally voicing something he’s been thinking about for a while. “If a bomb falls on the building, do you honestly think the people in the basement will be any better off than we are? All they can do is move on to the next basement, and the next one once that building collapses, and the one after that. They’ll just be a pile of bones at the end of the street by the time it’s all over.”

Farlan looks at him in silence for a moment, his expression somewhere between anger and fear until that calm indifference takes over again. In the end he merely sighs and walks over to the sofa, lying down and picking up his book as if no bombs fell at all.

That night Levi lies awake, fighting to get comfortable on Farlan’s spot in the sitting room. His body never grows tired now and at night he’s the most restless, the most aware of how quiet everything is, how quiet everything needs to be. When his thoughts start to drift to Kenny and his mother and the silence of those lonely nights spent with her corpse, he pulls out the photograph and peers at it in the darkness, finding her eyes, the line of her mouth, the seriousness of her expression. Levi counts the years and thinks of how likely it is that she was already pregnant when the picture was taken. It would certainly explain how sombre she looks, though her corseted waist shows nothing of her potential condition. It seems every time he looks at the photograph he remembers another little thing he had forgotten, something oddly soothing in its sadness: a gesture of her hands, the sound of her laugh, the little endearing things she used to call him.

After breakfast the following day, Levi weighs everything again: powdered eggs, powdered milk, tea and oats. He marks down the numbers onto his piece of paper and does his calculations which, in the light of the bombings, seem a little more useless than they did the

day before. Farlan snorts quietly as he stops by the kitchen, but to Levi's surprise Isabel takes a seat by his left elbow and watches him closely, her eyes moving along with the tip of his pen. Every once in a while she points at something on the page as Levi adds and subtracts, multiplies and divides, asking him to explain what it all means. He teaches her in whispers, remembering how Kenny taught him, how he first learned to read the numbers upside down watching his uncle writing them in his big ledger book. He always had a cigarette between his lips when he did that, and the smoke would obscure the pages as Levi tried to follow his hands. Kenny would mumble the calculations to himself as he riffled through the receipts, and some days it was the only time Levi heard him talk at all. They often communicated through various grunting sounds rather than words, and Levi has noticed doing the same with Isabel and Farlan now, more so after every day that passes.

They're having lunch – a small bowl of pea soup each – when they hear the sound of a key turning in the lock. It doesn't make any of them nervous anymore; a knock would be terrifying, but only Marie has the key. Isabel slurps up the rest of her soup at top speed and leaves the kitchen; by the time Levi and Farlan follow her, she's already sitting on the sofa with baby Sofie in her arms. Marie points at the record player and Farlan rushes to the corner to turn it on. Levi knows he's heard the song before – he must have heard it at the party – but the words don't sound familiar to him. Farlan hurries to Marie as well, asking about the weather in a tone that sounds unnatural in its excitement, and though Farlan seems to barely hear her answers, he keeps asking, about whether it's been snowing, whether it's been cold, whether there are signs of an early spring.

"I'm sorry it's been so long," Marie whispers, glancing at Isabel and the baby before turning back to Levi and Farlan. "I've been so busy with—"

"Don't you worry about it," Farlan tells her at once, guiding her into one of the armchairs after she lays down the bag she's carrying. "You know we're happy to have you come here."

"I could hardly bring anything," she explains next as she sees Levi peering into the bag. "There's hardly anything left in the shops and I—"

"Don't worry about it," Levi repeats Farlan's words. "We'll make do with what we have."

"He'll make sure of that, even if we all turn as bony as skeletons," Farlan says but unlike before, his tone is appreciative rather than spiteful.

Marie lets out a quiet chuckle before growing serious. "I've got more news than food."

"About the bombing?" Farlan asks eagerly and she nods.

"They're saying it was the Americans," Marie explains. "They hit the Friedrichstadt station. I heard over a hundred people died."

"That's terrible," Farlan gasps. "So many people..."

"Do you think the bombs could have hit Frau Gernhardt and Hanna and Bruno?" Isabel asks, sounding worried.

“Probably not, unless they were at the station. I don’t know what reason they would have had to have been there, though,” Farlan tells her quickly. “But still, even if it’s no one you know, just living in the same city...”

Levi searches for some kind of emotion, but he finds he’s more worried about emptying the bucket in the bathroom than about the victims of the attack. He can’t help but wonder whether the coldness is something that comes from the things he’s done; it’s hard to deny he’s been ruthless with his kills.

“I know. The thought makes me shudder,” Marie agrees. “But like Erwin said, none of us will be innocent by the end of all this.”

Levi and Farlan nod along with her words while Isabel coos at the baby, drawing Marie’s attention and making her smile. She crosses the room and sits down next to her on the sofa, looking down at them both with a motherly smile.

“You’re so good with her,” she tells Isabel, who smiles. “Did you have many younger siblings growing up?”

Isabel nods, but doesn’t tell Marie anything more about her family, and she doesn’t ask. Farlan takes a seat on her other side while Levi leaves the room to clean the bathroom and empty some of the waste in the bucket and flush it down the toilet. He changes the clean water he keeps in other buckets for washing – and for drinking, should things go so far south. When he moves on to refill the jugs of water he keeps in the kitchen, he finds Marie, Farlan and Isabel sitting around the table and talking quietly. He takes the paper bag Marie brought and lifts it onto the counter to take out the things inside it: some white flour and dried peas, a bottle of apple juice and a small packet of dried yeast for baking.

“Things are getting more and more difficult for everyone,” Marie says with a sigh. “Food is getting so scarce. I’m worried soon I won’t be able to find anything for Sofie.”

“We have some powdered milk,” Levi tells her quietly. “You can have it for later if you want – we’ll manage just fine without.”

He’s half expecting Farlan to protest but in the end the man just says, “Absolutely. We’ll make do just fine with what we have.”

“I don’t know...” Marie hesitates. “It doesn’t feel right, taking food from you when I’m supposed to be the one to bring it.”

“Try to think of it as an exchange,” Farlan suggests. “You bring us something we need, and we give you something you need – a stone age economy.”

“Yes, it really seems like we’re going back to that,” Marie says and lets out a breathy chuckle before growing more serious as Levi sits down at the table. “I met with a friend of mine from Berlin last week,” she says. “She moved here recently and contacted me. The way she spoke of things...”

“What did she say?” Farlan asks and Marie shakes her head.

“Things are different in Berlin,” the woman starts her explanation. “The war is present there in a way it hasn’t been here yet. The bombings are constant. People... Well, according to my friend there aren’t many who still believe we’re going to win this war. Not that many talk about it, but you can hear it in the way people speak. No one seems to think things are going to improve any time soon. They’re rather preparing for the worst now.”

They nod along and Levi wonders whether Farlan is thinking about his home too, wondering whether the house he grew up in is still standing, wondering whether his parents have died already, buried somewhere under a pile of rubble. Of course Levi’s known it for months now, but hearing Marie say it makes it feel real, like it concerns all of them more than it ever did Erwin even with all the work the man did to end the war as quickly as possible.

“Oh, my beloved Berlin,” Farlan whispers and sighs. “How did it look when you left? Was the main building of the University still in one piece?”

“It was when I left,” Marie tells him, “but I couldn’t say how it’s fared since then. So many kept losing their homes – I only lost one apartment, so I consider myself lucky.”

“It’s terrible, not knowing what has happened to people there,” Farlan says. “I did have *some* friends in the city – and my parents...”

His voice breaks and Marie reaches out across the table to take his hand in hers. Farlan wipes his eyes and nose quickly on the sleeve of his shirt.

“All this loss of life,” Marie whispers. “It’s abominable. And all for what? Ashes and bones and ruins.”

Farlan nods, looking sad and tired, his eyes misty and red as Marie strokes his thumb with hers and Isabel wraps her arm around his shoulders. Levi can’t help but feel uncomfortable for Farlan – he’d be crawling out of his skin should anyone try the same with him – but the man looks perfectly at ease with the attention he’s being given.

“No one can know for sure now,” Marie starts, “but there’s hope your parents are still alive and well. There are still people living in Berlin – and who knows, maybe they too have moved somewhere safer.”

Farlan nods and chuckles, still wiping his nose. “You’re right. They might have gone up to Rügen to wait things out. It would be just like my father to think of something like that.”

Marie gives Farlan a few more pats on the back of his hand before the faint sound of Sofie’s whining cries carries to her ears and she stands up. As she tends to the baby, Levi flushes the rest of the waste in the bucket down the toilet and fills the paper bag with the powdered milk, a few empty jars and a book Farlan has already finished reading. He hands the package to her as she’s heading out the door.

“I’m sorry I can’t stay for longer,” she whispers to them, holding baby Sofie with one arm and pulling Isabel closer with the other. “Nile’s mother took a bad fall a few days ago and... Well, nowadays I’m not sure who needs my help more, she or Sofie.”

“Will you come back soon, Marie?” Isabel asks her quietly and Marie bends down to give her a kiss on the forehead.

“As soon as I can, sweetling,” she promises before Levi pulls Isabel away from the door, waiting to hear Marie closing it behind her.

Just like the previous time after Marie left, the apartment feels much more silent than it did before she entered it. Without the music from the record player the rooms seem to hum with an emptiness that makes Levi’s skin itch. They all stand around for a moment, shifting back and forth on their feet without knowing what to do, until Farlan walks quietly to his usual place on the sofa, picks up his book and starts to read. Isabel follows Levi into the kitchen to watch him mark down the changes in their food supply, writing down the lack of powdered milk, the addition to their supply of peas, even the apple juice, though they’re likely to drink it by the following evening.

“How does Marie know Erwin?” Isabel suddenly asks, making Levi look up from his piece of paper, surprised at the sting of jealousy the thought brings before he can push it aside.

“They’ve been friends for a long time,” Levi tells her, squinting at the numbers on the page and wondering whether he’s likely to mistake the smudgy three for a five – an error like that could cost them dearly; it’s a much better thing to focus on.

“Is Marie from where Erwin’s from?”

“They met in Berlin,” Levi says, but Isabel shakes her head.

“I mean where Erwin’s *really* from,” she corrects him, and he looks up again.

“How do you know about that?” he asks her and she shrugs.

“I heard him talking with Mike,” she simply states. “Are they from the same place?”

Levi thinks about the question. “Sort of,” he finally decides, “though not really. Marie’s not from there.”

“Nanaba’s not from there either,” Isabel tells him and he nods, turning back to his numbers as she falls silent for a moment before suddenly asking, “What does it mean that you’re Jewish, big brother?”

Levi looks up from his sheet of paper again, frowning and at a loss for words. It feels to him as though he must have asked himself this question many times during his life and still like it has never entered his mind. For as long as he can remember it has only meant this – misery and loneliness and being despised for no reason – but that can’t be the whole truth, not the start of it all, not what it meant in the beginning. He remembers asking Kenny about it once, when he was younger. *Why am I Jewish?* It seemed like such a simple question, and Kenny’s answer was equally understandable: *because your mother was Jewish*. And was his mother Jewish because her mother was Jewish? There had to be more to it than that.

“Does it mean you’re from somewhere else as well?” Isabel asks now, and Levi shakes his head.

“It means...” he starts, but doesn’t find the right words. “I don’t know. It’s about religion and... things. I’m not sure.”

“I think I knew Jewish people before I met you,” she tells him. “They didn’t look any different but people made fun of them anyway, until one day everyone got really serious. That’s when all the terrible things started to happen.”

Levi looks at her, the sadness in her eyes and the weariness in her expression, and wishes he knew what to say.

“I felt bad for them because people used to make fun of us too,” she says, keeping her gaze on the table. “The way they looked at us was evil, like we weren’t even people.”

Levi nods. “I know,” he states, and he means what he says – he knows that look well.

“Why do they hate us so much, big brother?”

Levi thinks about the question for a moment. “I don’t know,” he finally admits. “Because we’re different, I suppose. I don’t know why they think that’s such a bad thing, though.”

Isabel nods pensively for a while before asking, “Is that why they hate Farlan? Because he’s different too?”

“I suppose so,” Levi says, folding up the piece of paper but remaining in his seat.

“Because he loves Christofer and doesn’t want to get married,” Isabel voices and Levi nods again. “But you don’t want to get married either, do you, big brother? Unless you’d marry Erwin.”

Levi snorts quietly at the absurdity and whispers, “You shouldn’t say things like that.”

Isabel lets out a heavy sigh and leans her cheeks onto the palms of her hands. “They only hate me and Farlan for one reason,” she says. “Must be terrible having them hate you for more than that.”

“They hate you for dressing up as a boy,” Levi reminds her. “Or would if they knew you weren’t really a boy.”

Isabel sighs again and lays her chin against the table. “Why are all girls supposed to wear skirts anyway?” she asks him. “It just gets in the way – and if it’s a nice one it’s not supposed to get dirty when you wear it. How can you do anything then?”

Levi shrugs and smiles. “You could wear an ugly one,” he suggests, thinking about where all this is coming from, “or be like Nanaba and just keep wearing trousers.”

“I wish I were like Nanaba,” Isabel tells him almost dreamily. “I don’t want you to be sad but I like her the most.”

Levi lets out a quiet laugh. “Don’t worry,” he says. “It doesn’t make me sad to hear that.”

“I guess Erwin already likes you the most. But...” she says, like thinking aloud. “Who likes Farlan the most then?”

They both cast a glance toward the sitting room, and it seems neither of them has an answer to Isabel’s question.

“He was sad before we left,” Isabel tells him even more quietly than before. “He kept looking out of the window when you were gone, and he’d snap at me if I asked him anything.”

Levi wants to ask Isabel why she thinks Farlan has been sad, but she tells him before he gets a chance to.

“He thinks no one loves him,” she whispers, “and then he’s mean just so he can understand why nobody does. He thinks it’s better to know than to be left wondering.”

“Did he tell you that?” Levi asks her, but she shakes her head.

“I just know,” Isabel says, and they fall quiet.

Late that night when Levi lies on the sofa and stares up at the ceiling, Isabel’s questions keep chasing each other in his mind. He thinks about his answers, how far they were from any sort of real explanation. Erwin could have answered them, could have explained it all in fancy words, what makes regular people do terrible things. Of course Levi has his own explanations: most people are selfish, disgusting pieces of shit who don’t care about helping anyone but themselves. But it’s not something he wants to impart to Isabel; it’s still not how she sees the numbers, that there are more bad people than good, and Levi refuses to be the one to shatter that illusion.

His thoughts move on to other things he said, how the Nazis hate them all because they’re different. And why *is* that a bad thing, that people aren’t all the same, that they aren’t just a nameless, faceless mass? Erwin said something about that once, didn’t he, when he was talking with Farlan? Something about everyone having a soul, something that makes them unique. If everyone’s already one of a kind on the inside, what purpose does it serve to try to make everyone the same? By what sense does having blond hair and blue eyes suddenly make a person better than someone without?

Levi turns onto his side and sighs in frustration. Too much time to think, just as he feared there would be; it’s what idleness does, makes people think about stupid things like this, to focus on why something is the way it is rather than focusing on how to survive it. Though then again, what does he know? Maybe if people had thought about these things before, none of this would have happened in the first place.

Levi closes his eyes and tries to sleep, but the whys won’t let him be, not even when he forces himself to think about something else: the garden of the cottage as it bathed in the sunlight on that summer morning that feels now as if he never really lived it. The thought

keeps flooding his mind, the question he was most bothered by while he talked with Isabel: *what does it mean that you're Jewish?* It's a different sort of question, it's not about other people and trying to guess why they are the way they are. It's something else, it's something within Levi, it's his entire life somehow and still it's nothing at all. He thinks about the rabbis Kenny used to invite to their home, thinks of the funny little hats they wore and the shawls and the sidelocks, but doesn't understand any better now why they wanted to dress like that, why they wanted to wear their hair like that.

Levi tries to remember what they talked about, but it never made sense and he never paid attention, or he never understood because Kenny never tried to teach him Yiddish or Hebrew until he was too old to care. They read books and argued while Levi made them dinner and did the dishes once they were done eating. From what Levi could gather they talked about laws and discussed politics, leaning this way and that with their opinions on how bad things could get under Hitler's thumb. Levi always suspected they talked about him as well. Sometimes a rabbi would lower his voice and ask Kenny things that made him look uncomfortable, and afterward he would keep casting strange glances at Levi, something nearly tortured in his expression.

Levi never thought much about it then, simply found it all more than a little irritating, but now he can't help but wonder. Were they asking Kenny about Levi's education, why he didn't know what he was supposed to know by then? Levi knows there are some things that were supposed to happen: his mother took care of the first, but there were other things, something when you turn thirteen that Kenny never put Levi through. Was it regret that Kenny felt when he looked at Levi then, for neglecting to raise him to understand those parts of himself, for breaking some kind of generational link that should have tied Levi to his past, to his mother, to the grandparents he never met? Levi tries to search for that same feeling within himself, regret, or some kind of emptiness or curiosity, but there's nothing. His mother wasn't Jewish – she was his mother, pure and simple. And Kenny was... Well, just Kenny, and he didn't let Levi starve to death and made sure he had a roof over his head and clothes on his back. That's what they were to him, and he's just Levi. And still...

He suddenly remembers her again, the woman he ran into during Darlett's mission, remembers how the star on her coat was half hidden behind her bushy and matted hair. The way he greeted her, he wanted to let her know what he was, that he was like her, that they were somehow the same even if they had never met before and would never meet again. So he is Jewish and isn't, doesn't know what it means and knows exactly: it means fear and hunger and isolation, but also strength and anger and resistance, a stubborn refusal to be turned into ash and empty spaces. So that woman is his people, even if by force, even if it's the only thing they share, and maybe that's all it means, that Levi is Jewish: that somehow in the loneliness and hardship of his life he has a people, he belongs somewhere, he's a part of something that may be too large in scale for him to understand.

It's not until Farlan walks quietly into the sitting room that Levi remembers what Isabel said about the man. He watches Farlan crossing the room and sits up to make a space for him on the sofa. He sits down and rubs at his face with his hands.

"God, I could really use a smoke right now," he huffs and turns to Levi. "Can't sleep?"

Levi shakes his head and Farlan yawns. “Is Isabel sleeping?”

“A little restlessly, but better than we are,” Farlan tells him and leans back on the sofa. They’re quiet for a long while before he finally says, “Is it difficult for you? Being here?”

Levi turns to look at Farlan, feeling the sudden urge to figure out how he means it, but when the man’s expression reveals nothing he simply shrugs and states. “I thought it’d be worse. I can’t stand staying still for too long, you know.”

“I meant because of Erwin,” Farlan explains his earlier words. “This place must remind you of him.”

Levi shrugs again. “It feels different when he’s not here,” he says, hearing the strain in his own voice and feeling grateful when Farlan doesn’t ask him anything more about it.

“I think if I went back home now I’d see Christofer in everything,” the man whispers, and Levi’s relieved he’s talking about himself now. “There were times when he was spending more time in my room than at home.”

“Why?”

“A lot of the time he didn’t want to go home,” Farlan explains. “I suppose it’s been the same for you.”

“What do you mean by that?” Levi asks, frowning as Farlan merely shrugs.

“Just that you spent a lot of time here, towards the end,” he says, looking around the room.

“You think it’s because I didn’t want to come home?” Levi asks Farlan, whose expression grows strained.

“No, not that exactly,” he clarifies, “but I understand why you preferred staying here instead of with me and Isabel. It must have been tiring, lying to us all the time, about yourself and Erwin – and that man–”

“I told you,” Levi says, aware of his whisper turning into a hiss as he feels that familiar pang of guilt. “I had to do that, to keep you safe. I didn’t want you involved, it was too dangerous–”

“Yes, you did say that,” Farlan interrupts him and sighs. “I guess I just thought after everything we’ve been through you could trust me a little more than that. I’m not completely useless.”

“I know you’re not useless,” Levi tells him but Farlan avoids his gaze. “The fewer people know about it, the better. That’s what Erwin said.”

“Well, I’m not just *people*, am I?” the man counters, sounding suddenly hurt and angry. “And never mind all that with Erwin. How could you not tell me about that man? How could you not tell me you were in trouble?”

“I don’t want to talk about–”

“I told you, Levi,” Farlan continues. “I told you I didn’t want you to do anything like that for my sake. I told you I wasn’t comfortable with–”

“I did it for all our sakes,” Levi hisses, feeling suddenly sad and exhausted. “I thought I could get us out of here, far away from all of this. I thought I could save all of our lives, just put up with it for a little while and we’d all be... We’d all...”

Levi feels his breath hitching in his throat as his words falter and the sudden pity that takes over Farlan’s expression makes him ache and turn away from the man. The thought of Krieger pushes through, the memory of how warm his blood felt on Levi’s hands, the way his mouth gaped open, the fear and shock on his face when...

“I don’t understand why you’re bringing any of this up now,” Levi tells Farlan calmly. “It’s done. It had nothing to do with you then and it has nothing to do with you now. No one’s going to come asking you about it, so I don’t understand why you care.”

“Oh, you’re such a stupid little shit, Levi,” Farlan whispers and scoffs. “You think after all these years, after we’ve known each other for– We’ve shared a bed for five years, for fuck’s sake! You and Isabel are the only two people who know who I really am, the only ones who know I’m not just loony Friedrich from upstairs! You think after all of that I don’t care what happens to you? You think I don’t care about how you feel?”

Levi sits in silence and lets Farlan breathe deeply for a moment.

“Maybe you can decide not to care about what goes on with me and Isabel,” he finally says. “Maybe you can just leave us out of whatever considerations you make regarding your own life. But I can’t do that. I can’t just find out something like this and not care.”

“Of course I care about you and Isabel,” Levi says. “Of course I thought about that. I told you, that’s why I did any of it with–”

“But why didn’t you tell me?” Farlan asks. “I don’t understand why you didn’t share something like that with me. You just let me assume–”

“You think I wanted to talk about that?” Levi whispers, his anger flaring again. “You think I wanted to remember any of–”

“I don’t know,” Farlan sighs. “No, I suppose you didn’t. But you did tell Erwin.”

“I barely said anything to him,” Levi tries to explain. “He knew something was happening, same as you. We never talked about it because I didn’t want to. He knew that and he didn’t ask.”

“Fine, you don’t want to talk about it. I understand that,” Farlan says and sighs again, rubbing at his face with his hands. “I don’t know what I’m trying to say. I suppose... Well, I wish you’d think I’m as trustworthy as Erwin – though I understand why you don’t.”

"It's not about that," Levi tries, though he's not sure he means it. "It was all just a coincidence, with Erwin. And then when I started... I had to do something. I've put up with this shit for too long not to."

"And you think I haven't?" Farlan asks him calmly. "My life's been ruined too you know, the same as yours. I have just as much cause to hate the Nazis as you do."

"I know," Levi whispers and sighs, choosing not to say anything about the way Farlan flinches every time anyone mentions he's a Jew. "It's dangerous, what Erwin and I did. Just knowing about it is dangerous. I never would have involved you two in any way if I could've avoided it. Nanaba was... Well, I didn't want it to come to that, but I couldn't help it."

"I do believe you when you say that," Farlan mutters. "I know you thought you were protecting us by lying about it. I just..." His words trail off for a moment. "I don't know what I'm trying to say. There's something that still bothers me about all of this."

"Like I said, it's done," Levi tells him. "With a bit of luck we'll be able to stay here until the end of the war. It's all you have to worry about."

Farlan sighs again. "I know," he says, "and if you don't take the air raids and bombings into account, it's not difficult for me, being here. I've got my books and they keep me busy."

Levi nods. "You're lucky you're the reading type," he says and Farlan scoffs.

"The one time it has been of any use to me," he whispers. "You're probably right. I would have been of no use to you and Erwin, just like I was useless in the Jugend."

"There's lots you could have done," Levi insists. "Planning and all that. I was never much good at it."

"Erwin's not from Austria, is he?"

The sudden question makes Levi fall quiet for a moment before he shakes his head. "England," he merely states. "His mother is Austrian. Explains why you can't tell."

Farlan gets heavily to his feet. "I suppose it explains a lot," he says. "All those opinions of his for one. And there was always something very... un-German in the way he behaved."

Levi grunts and wants to remind Farlan that Erwin isn't dead, but knows as far as they're concerned, he's as good as.

"I think I'll try and get some sleep now," Farlan tells him. "You should do the same. Though some days I don't understand why any of us bother."

Levi scoffs. "I wish Erwin had left us a calendar or something," he says. "I'm already losing track of the days."

"A few days over two weeks by my counting," Farlan whispers, rubbing at his eyes and yawning. "We should ask Marie next time."

Levi agrees with a nod and lies down on the sofa as Farlan leaves the room; he can hear the bedsprings squeaking quietly. Levi closes his eyes and waits for sleep, but his limbs feel light and ready for anything. He thinks back to all his missions, even the disastrous one with Mike, how they ran from the railyard with bullets speeding past them, and even that memory seems sweet to him now. He opens his eyes to glance at the walls, at the decorative double doors, his gaze finally stopping at the secretaire. He can't help thinking of Erwin, how heavy his frame looked when he sat in the chair, how the *tap tap tap* of the typewriter lulled him to sleep the day they first met. Before he falls asleep, Levi thinks that if he could grow as tired from forcing himself not to think of Erwin as he does from running away from soldiers, he could no doubt sleep his way through the rest of the war without making an effort.

By the time Marie next visits over a week later, they've lived through another air raid and though this time it was a false alarm, the three quarter hours they spent huddled together in the pantry were full of a new kind of fear due to the bombing. Marie has more news about it too, which she shares as soon as Farlan has placed a record in the player.

"Over three hundred people died," she tells them when they gather around the table. "Women, children... It feels like Berlin all over again."

"It's so terrible." Levi can hear Farlan whisper as he empties the food out of the paper bag: powdered eggs, dried apricots, oats.

"I really thought we could be safe here," Marie says and sighs. "I suppose there's no place left that's safe now."

The words make Levi think about the end of the war. It's been on his mind more and more – it's all the counting of the food that does it, makes him guess and estimate. He doesn't say anything about it to Marie and the others; it doesn't seem kind to remind anyone of what's likely to happen.

"All we need is for the war to end," Isabel voices Levi's thoughts, but continues, "then everyone will come back home and everything will be just like it was before."

Marie reaches across the table and takes her hand, smiling at her warmly. "I really hope so, sweetling," she tells her, rubbing at the back of her hand with her thumb. "Then you can help me with little Sofie, play with her and tell her stories."

"You can come visit me at the farm," Isabel whispers excitedly. "Or... Well, I'm not sure about the farm anymore. I might want to live somewhere close to the sea, or... Well, maybe not stay in one place for too long."

"Well, whenever you happen to be wherever we are, you're always welcome to visit," Marie lets her know before turning to Levi and Farlan. "And the same goes for you two of course."

"And if you ever happen to be back in Berlin after the war, you're welcome to stay at mine, though – before I come across a fortunate match or my inheritance – I will live in a small apartment, like a starving artist," Farlan says, making Marie chuckle.

“Maybe we’ll just pop round for a cup of coffee then,” she tells him. “We wouldn’t want Sofie to get her hands on the invaluable first draft of your latest novel.”

They all stop to chuckle quietly into their cups of thin tea as Levi sits down to join them.

“And what about you, Levi?” Marie asks him. “What plans do you have for when all this is over?”

It feels as though it’s been a lifetime since Levi’s really considered the question. He remembers Isabel asking him, but it must have been near a year ago, and it seems he’s no closer to an answer now than he was back then.

“I don’t know,” he admits, feeling stupid for not being able to dream like they can, not being able to forget the reality of things.

“Well, whatever it is, I’m sure you’ll shine at it,” Marie says; there’s something so motherly in her tone that Levi feels a strain in his throat. “And I’ve just remembered! News from Erwin.”

The words hit Levi like a jolt in his body and as Marie stands up and leaves the room, he feels the urge to follow her. She returns less than a minute later holding a plain white envelope which she hands swiftly to Levi; her address in Erwin’s handwriting on the back makes Levi frown before he pulls out the letter and begins to read slowly, frowning ever more deeply at the strange voice somewhere between Erwin and Holtz that he finds on the page.

Dear Marie,

I hope all is well with you, and that little Sofie is in good health. I’ve heard food has been scarce even on the home front. I hope you have been able to find everything you and your family need.

They’ve sent me east, that’s all I can say. My duties even here are more administrative so I’m further from the frontlines, but the bombs don’t watch where they fall, and the Red Army isn’t far from knocking on our door. I suppose someone has to make sure everything runs smoothly, and I have no real reason to complain.

I don’t want to tell you about the harder things. I wouldn’t want to upset you with something like that. You should know that for now I am well – that’s all any of us can hope for in the end.

Another quick expression of my gratitude to you for taking care of my home when I’m gone. I know you’re aware I haven’t got much in this world, and that my apartment means a great deal to me. I’m sure you’re doing a great job.

That’s all for now.

All the best,

Your Commander

Levi reaches the end and reads the letter again. It seems like the first time he's felt anything while reading, and it's almost as if he's feeling it all now. He can feel his heart hammering in his chest, with excitement, with fear, with disappointment and sadness and joy. His gaze skips from sentence to sentence, always coming back to the most important: *for now I am well*. After a while it's all that matters, all the letter is about: Erwin is alive, he is well enough to hold a pen, well enough to write letters. Alive.

"He didn't write anything about us," Isabel whispers behind Levi, sounding disappointed.

"Oh, I don't know," Marie says, wrapping her arm around Isabel's shoulders. "I felt there was a lot in that letter that wasn't really meant for me."

Levi reads the letter one more time before handing it back, not letting himself believe Marie's right, but forgetting to ask her for the date nonetheless.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- mildly foul language

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I hope you all like chapter 21! The next one will be posted as soon as it's done.

This chapter is dedicated to lostcauses - you know why. <3

Follow me on [tumblr](#) if you want!

I'm also on [Twitter](#).

WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi feels the strain in his muscles as he sits up from the floor, hands held by his head and lips pinched tightly together. He doesn't count – what would be the point? – but simply tries to work himself to something resembling exhaustion, or even tiredness; it's becoming more and more difficult as the days and weeks go by. Before he slowly lowers his upper body back onto the floor, he glances at Farlan on his usual spot on the sofa, a book resting against his chest. Levi squints at the blue cover and makes out the golden symbol in the middle: a swastika inside a wreath of leaves with an eagle drawn above. When he sits back up again, he makes out the name written on the spine of the book and feels shivers running down his arms despite the sweat pouring out under the shirt he's wearing. Levi contemplates saying something when he finally stands up, his muscles tight and sore, but seeing Farlan so unaware of his irritation, he decides against it and leaves the room in soundless, controlled steps.

In the bathroom he stops to look at himself in the mirror, and it feels like the first time he's done so since the year changed. In the dim light of the candle his cheeks look hollow and the circles under his eyes dark and wide, but they catch his attention far less than the stubble–no, *beard* that has sprouted onto his face. Farlan's grows more slowly but Levi's heard him shaving more often than once, and how the man cares enough to bother with it is beyond Levi. He scratches the back of his head, the undercut far from stubbly now when his fingers find their way past the longer hair on top. A frightful sight, Levi decides, and no wonder little Sofie cries whenever she sees him. And what would Erwin think, seeing Levi like this? He noticed Levi had cut his hair, that one time, when they went to the cottage. Yes, Erwin noticed little things like that but then, who knows how much he cared this way or that?

Levi cleans the sweat off his body quickly before nodding Farlan into the bathroom, handing him a pair of scissors and the hair clippers he found in the drawer of Erwin's washstand. Farlan exhales tiredly as Levi sits down on the little stool but accepts the tools nonetheless

and starts cutting. They don't speak, Farlan doesn't even ask Levi if he's happy with the result, simply puts down the hair clippers and waits for Levi's nod of approval before walking back out to the sitting room and the book Levi can't help glaring at again on his way to the kitchen after shaving his face. He returns to the bathroom to quietly sweep up the hair that's fallen onto the floor before joining Isabel in the bedroom. She opens her eyes as he lies down on the bed.

"Hey, big brother," she whispers, her words slurring a bit from the medicine; the last of her morphine – another thing to worry about. "Are you sleepy too?"

Levi nods, though he isn't. It seems like he could sleep now regardless, and he's determined to try.

"I had that dream about horses again," Isabel tells him and yawns. "They were scared and screaming but... The medicine makes it easier not to care."

Levi nods again. "Maybe one of these nights you'll save them," he whispers.

"Maybe," Isabel replies, though she doesn't look convinced. "Do you ever get off the train when you dream of that?"

"No," Levi says. "I'm just... waiting."

"I understand," Isabel tells him softly, pressing her hand against his cheek for a moment. "Maybe one of these nights you will, and you'll see it's not so bad."

"Maybe," Levi says as well, and he's sure he sounds as uncertain as Isabel, and the words make him remember what Erwin told him so vividly he flinches. "You should sleep some more."

Isabel nods tiredly and yawns again. "If Marie comes, will you wake me?" she asks, only falling asleep once Levi assures her he will.

As he lies awake next to her, Levi notices the silence for the first time that day. A week ago it still had the power to get on his nerves, to make him restless, to make him short-tempered and itching but now he has tamed it – or it has tamed him. And a good thing, too. Farlan was right, he was starting to lose it, counting the peas one by one like that. It was better to go back to weighing everything out, it was just as good and accurate even if it didn't take up as much time. Still, better for Farlan to keep his sanity than for Levi to keep his – and he was driving the man up the wall, insisting he count the peas before cooking them. Things are better now – well, for that part at least.

He rolls onto his side and thinks about stroking Isabel's hair, but changes his mind at the last second. It's as greasy as his, no doubt – no shampoo, and they can't waste soap for something like that when it's more important to keep themselves and their clothes from smelling from here to Berlin. Farlan used to complain but the silence has tamed him too, and now he says nothing about it when he combs his hair back, though Levi can tell he shudders at how well it holds its shape.

He falls asleep and wakes up... well, it doesn't matter how many minutes or hours later. Since the clock that sits atop the secretaire stopped, they've been nearly blind to the change of day and night. For a while Levi used to keep track by peering out the window every once in a while, but he stopped caring quickly enough. The apartment is always so dim that Farlan gets headaches from squinting at the pages. Only when Marie visits does a little light get in, when she opens the windows to let fresh air flood into the rooms. The first time she did it Levi merely sat there, breathing in the cold, sweet, intoxicating winter air until his nose and chest ached from it. The memory makes him notice the stuffiness of the room and he forces it out of his mind as he turns to stare at the ceiling in the dark.

He had a dream about Kenny again, or something between a dream and a memory, of the day when he found him. It's not unusual – when he was younger he used to dream of that often enough – but here it's different. When before he was always himself, looking up at Kenny looming over him, in the dream now he is Kenny looking down at himself, a scrawny little kid with twigs for arms and legs. He feels confused and conflicted, protective and reluctant to protect, and he doesn't know which would be worse: living with the knowledge of having abandoned your own flesh and blood, or taking in a child and being... Not a father, but something of the sort, someone who makes room in his own life for taking care of someone else.

Levi reaches into his pocket and takes out the photograph, squinting through the darkness at Kenny's face. There's something of his uncle in him as well; after seeing the picture Levi can't deny it, he sees it every time he looks into the mirror now. Kenny did the best he could with him – it's a thought that's been nagging Levi lately, ever since the dream, and though he's doubted it in the past, he's oddly sure of it now. It was a difficult situation, and he was difficult too, and so was Kenny. They were too much alike, or Levi grew up to be like his uncle in his sullenness and in the way he never really told him about things, no matter how important. It wasn't about lack of trust, and Levi never felt Kenny wouldn't care to hear. Perhaps the silence tamed them both then too.

"What's that?" Isabel whispers suddenly and Levi turns, shuffling closer to let her look at the picture.

"That's my mother," he tells her gently, pointing at her in the picture before moving his finger, "and that's my uncle."

"You have a picture?" Isabel asks, sounding nothing short of amazed. "Did you take it from your home before you left?"

Levi shakes his head; Kenny didn't have any pictures and never got any taken, of himself or of Levi. "Erwin found it for me," he explains quietly.

"I don't have any pictures," Isabel tells him, "but my mother always said all you have to do is close your eyes and you'll have a hundred pictures right there."

"That's smart," Levi says, giving the photograph to the girl so she can bring it up to her face and look at it more closely. "Saves you the money."

“That’s what my father said,” she mutters, rubbing at her eyes before peering at the picture again. “They look like you. Do you miss them?”

Levi thinks about the question and shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says. “Yes, I suppose. Do you miss your family?”

Isabel nods but says nothing more about it, handing over the picture. “I’m glad you have a treasure,” she tells him and smiles.

Levi puts the photograph back into his pocket and ruffles Isabel’s hair before getting out of bed and walking out of the room; Farlan has fallen asleep on the sofa, *Mein Kampf* open on his chest. A part of Levi wants to pick the book up and put it somewhere out of sight, but at the same time he feels against reason as though touching it will taint his hands and he leaves it where it is; just seeing how worn the copy is makes his skin crawl.

He leaves Farlan to his slumber and walks into the kitchen, stretching his arms above his head and yawning quietly before sitting down at the table. His gaze keeps shifting to the cupboards and his hands are itching to reach for the piece of paper to write down something, anything, to go behind Farlan’s back and start counting the peas just to have something to do. He picks up the deck of cards instead, playing a game of klondike before sighing and giving up, starting on the cooking though he’s barely even hungry. Farlan and Isabel join him for their humble meal – Levi couldn’t say whether it’s a breakfast, lunch, dinner or supper, and he supposes it doesn’t matter either. None of them have much of an appetite, and Levi’s glad when after such small portions they all agree on being full. He writes down the subtractions, taking greater care with the numbers than he needs to; and still no time seems to pass.

They all go to their separate tasks, trying to make the hours go by how best they see fit. Farlan moves from the sofa over to the secretaire to write; the sight of him in Erwin’s chair makes Levi feel uncomfortable for a moment until he pushes past the feeling. Isabel has started writing as well, little notes on her newspaper clippings, facts about the U-Boats or some such things, Levi guesses. He himself goes through the contents of the secretaire, pulling out the drawers and placing them on the floor of the sitting room. He doesn’t know what he’s looking for, whether he’s wishing to see some sign of Erwin, some secret message the man has left for him, but everything he sees is Holtz; Erwin must have made sure not to leave anything incriminating behind.

When it seems like the right time for sleep again, Farlan and Isabel move over to the bed while Levi lies alone on the sofa, the tips of his fingers pushed under the waistband of his underwear; the touch is half-hearted, the thought of the mess halts his hand and besides, what good would it do? Everything here reminds him of Erwin – he denied it when Farlan asked him about it but the longer they spend here, the more useless the lies feel – so what good would it do to remind himself even further, to bring to mind the way Erwin touched him, how he looked at him, how he made him feel like himself but better, stronger, more in control than he’d felt in years. It comes back to him in painful flashes at moments like this: waking up next to Erwin, feeling his stubble against the back of his neck, feeling the strength of his arms around him and a thousand other things, his smell, his voice, the safe, steady sound of the beating of his heart.

Nothing happens, and the days go by slowly. The faucet in the kitchen begins to leak and Levi places an empty vase under it to catch the drops of water as they fall. The sound of the *drip drip drip* fills the kitchen and the sitting room, calming at first in the soundlessness of their lives but growing quickly into a nuisance that prompts Farlan to ask Levi to do something about it.

“When you think of a way to quietly fix faucets, let me know,” he tells the man sourly. “If I so much as accidentally knock one of the tools against the pipes, you’ll be able to hear it in all the other apartments.”

“You don’t have to talk to me like I’m an idiot, Levi,” Farlan huffs in annoyance. “Am I the only one who’s going mad from that sound?”

Levi shrugs. “It’s just another source of clean water,” he says. “If the bombs break the main pipelines, you’ll be glad that faucet’s been leaking.”

Farlan sighs heavily. “Well, I suppose we’ll all be half mad by the time we get out of here anyway.”

“I guess you’re running out of books already,” Levi says and scoffs, but the words make Farlan frown in confusion.

“I’ve still got plenty left,” he states, growing even more confused at Levi’s irritation.

He wants to say something but doesn’t, thinking better of it, thinking keeping his thoughts to himself will make this all more bearable. The thought won’t let him be during the hours when he lies awake; it’s almost as if he can sense the presence of the book that lies on the coffee table, still unfinished. The dripping of the faucet seems to echo in his head, and though he tries to pretend like it doesn’t bother him, by morning his nerves are frayed and his mood terrible, and he can’t help glaring at Farlan while he does his push-ups.

“So you’ve got other books to read?” he finally whispers; it takes Farlan half a dozen seconds to rip his eyes off the page.

“You know I give the ones I’ve read to Marie,” he replies quietly, turning back to the book as Levi takes a seat by the sofa.

“You’re just reading that for fun then,” Levi states.

Farlan hesitates for a moment before saying, “I’m not sure I’d say I’m reading it for fun, exactly, but it is interesting.”

“I don’t see what’s so interesting about it,” Levi huffs. “Just some lunatic screaming about killing everyone who’s like me – or like you.”

Farlan scoffs. “It’s actually about a lot more than that,” he says calmly. “This may very well be the most historically significant book of our time.”

Levi feels a shudder shooting down his spine. “You’re not serious.”

“I am, actually,” Farlan tells him matter-of-factly. “You’re free to disagree, but it won’t stop me from reading it.”

“I wouldn’t read it.”

“You don’t read anything.”

“Well I would sure as fuck not start with that one,” Levi hisses. “Why the fuck would you want to know what *he* has to say about anything?”

“I’m not saying I agree with any of it,” Farlan says. “It’s just a way to pass the time.”

“So are the other books.”

“Will you just—” Farlan groans, closing the book and sitting up on the sofa, leaning closer to Levi to whisper, “You know what? I actually don’t need to explain myself to you. I’m reading this book, and any reasons I may have for doing it don’t have to be good enough for you.”

They stare at each other for a moment in complete silence before Levi mutters, “It’s disgusting.”

“You’re entitled to your opinion,” Farlan tells him before lying back down.

Levi stares at him for a moment in a rage-fuelled silence before standing up and leaving the room; in the bathroom he doesn’t realise how hard he’s been rubbing at his skin until it starts to hurt. Suddenly the silence feels like a blanket that has fallen over his nose and mouth, suffocating him, sedating him, forcing him to keep quiet just like Krieger used to do by hanging the threat of death over his head. He wants to go back to the sitting room and shout at Farlan until his voice is raw, to tell him he’s tolerated his attitude for long enough. Before he always tried to understand, to find the explanations behind Farlan’s actions: he didn’t choose to grow up like this, he didn’t choose to join the Jugend, he didn’t choose to have his head filled with all of this shit but this... This is voluntary, with every word Farlan reads he’s making a conscious choice to find out how Hitler thinks, how he sees the world, and it’s difficult, painful to take into account.

And still he says nothing about it, just tries to adjust his own thinking when he lies awake at night, tries to convince himself that it’s nothing personal Farlan has against him, that it’s just... the kind of curiosity people get when they go to fancy schools and start thinking too much and blurring the lines between right and wrong. Eventually he forces himself not to care about it, suffocating all the feelings of anger he gets whenever he catches a glimpse of the blue linen covers of the book. He even stays quiet when Farlan takes it with him into the pantry to read during an air raid scare, swallowing all the questions about why Farlan would want to take the chance of those being the last words he’ll ever read.

To Levi’s relief Farlan is done with his reading by the time Marie next comes to visit, and he can slip the book into her paper bag as soon as he’s done emptying it. He can sense Farlan’s eyes on his back as he does, but the man doesn’t say anything about it either, and as Levi

places the paper bag on the counter, he feels himself pushing the matter even further away from his mind, hoping to forget about it by the day's end. He focuses instead on the flood of fresh air that's pouring in through the open windows; it's almost enough to make him move past the fact that for as long as the curtains are open, he has to stay in the kitchen, hidden and unseen.

"If we could keep the windows open, I would do nothing but breathe for a day," Isabel gasps, shushing little Sofie as she moves her onto the table to take off her warm winter clothes. "We like that fresh air, don't we Sofie-sweetness?"

Marie smiles as she looks at them and folds up the scarf she's tied around her head against the cold. "It must take a toll, being here all by yourselves," she whispers, stopping to coo at the baby as she smiles up at Isabel. "Oh, see? She likes you."

"And I love her," Isabel says, lifting Sofie up to lean against her shoulder and kissing her cheek. "I love you, Sofie-sweetness. You're the sweetest thing on this earth."

Marie chuckles softly. "I wish I felt the same way all the time – even when she cries all night and won't let me sleep."

"Don't keep your mommy awake, little Sofie," Isabel whispers to the baby. "She needs her sleep just like you do."

"Yes," Marie agrees. "I hope you three have been sleeping better than I have."

"It's all we have been doing," Levi mutters, meeting Marie's blue eyes and nearly flinching at the sympathy.

"I wish I could visit more often," she says again. "It's just that—"

"There's nothing you should feel guilty about," Farlan tells her quietly. "We owe you such a debt, we can't ever hope to repay it."

"I feel like I hardly do anything," Marie states, shaking her head. "The food is so scarce now. It's lucky Erwin always thinks a few steps ahead with these things."

"Any news from him?" Levi hurries to ask, but Marie shakes her head almost apologetically.

"Not since the first letter," she explains, sounding sad. "I know what it's like, the waiting – wondering if he just has no time to write or if..." she lets her words trail off as her eyes grow misty.

"Erwin's fine," Isabel tells them all, gazing down at Sofie and bouncing her on her arms. "Nanaba said Erwin's the strongest – except for Mike."

"Nanaba and Mike?" Marie asks her. "Are they friends of yours?"

Isabel nods. "Nanaba is my best friend. Mike is her giant. Together they fight evil – and ride motorcycles."

“Oh! How very exciting,” Marie tells her and laughs quietly. “And they’re friends of Erwin’s too?”

Isabel nods again. “He fights evil with them. I don’t know about the motorcycles though.”

“No motorcycles,” Levi tells her, “as far as I know, anyway.”

“No, not as far as I know either,” Marie confirms, “though they did use to get into some trouble with Nile back in the day.”

“What kind of trouble?” Levi asks; he finds it difficult to imagine Erwin drawing attention to himself like that, but he wants to hear more. Imagining Erwin as he must have been when he came to Germany, the same age as Levi is now, is something he hasn’t really thought of before.

“Well, I don’t know how else to say it but they weren’t strangers to the barkeeps of Berlin,” Marie says and chuckles. “Oh, how I used to tell them off about it, said they were going to get themselves arrested or get into a fight one night.”

“And did they?” Farlan asks.

Marie shakes her head. “It came close a few times. I had to talk them out of tight spots more often than once. But oh, did we have fun. All the dancing we did! Now I can’t understand how we had the strength!”

“Erwin’s dance card must have been full a lot,” Farlan mutters, making Marie laugh again.

“Oh, yes. There weren’t many who turned him down when he asked for a dance,” she admits.

“He is a great dancer,” Farlan voices quietly. “Is your husband as good?”

Marie looks a bit sheepish when she whispers, “Well...”

Farlan chuckles. “Most men have two left feet, from what I’ve seen,” he says. “I’m sure your husband has other virtues.”

“Yes,” Marie says, smiling widely and gazing at Isabel as she sits down next to her. “I worry about him constantly.”

“I know how you feel,” Farlan tells her, but frowns after a moment of silence. “Or I don’t, really. I wouldn’t know what it’s like to miss someone you’re married to.”

“It’s just about love, at the end of the day,” Marie says, taking Farlan’s hand. “Marriage is just a fancy word for it.”

Farlan nods, and it seems to Levi like he’s grateful for the words; he thinks about them too, but doesn’t find much comfort in them. After all, he never thought of Erwin like that, like what they had was something that could be likened to what other people have, what Marie has with her husband, what Farlan had with Christofer. Still, when Marie reaches out her

other hand Levi takes it, even if the connection feels false and the touch makes him feel more uneasy than comforted, and he pulls away from it after a short moment.

“It’s such a shame we can’t dance right now!” Marie suddenly says. “We have the music – and the wonderful company.”

“Oh don’t close the windows yet!” Isabel tells her at once. “I want to smell the trees for a little bit longer.”

“We couldn’t dance anyway,” Levi tries to calm her. “Someone might hear the footsteps.”

“Like I said, it’s such a shame,” Marie says again. “I’m sure we could all use some cheering up right now.”

“I don’t know about that,” Isabel whispers, bouncing baby Sofie in her lap and chuckling as she laughs. “I have all the cheering up I need right here.”

“She is so precious,” Farlan agrees, bending down to tickle the baby who laughs more loudly. “It’s wonderful, seeing new life.”

“I wish she had been born at a better time,” Marie confesses, placing her thumb on the palm of Sofie’s hand; she squeezes it gently, looking up at her mother. “At a time when I wouldn’t have to do this all alone, and I wouldn’t have to fear for her safety, or fear she might end up growing up an orphan. But I suppose all I can do is give her all the love I have right now, and hope for the best.”

“I think it’s all any of us can do, regardless of the circumstance,” Farlan says.

The words make Levi frown. Looking at the man now it seems strange that they would have shared a bed so comfortably once, that they would have slept with their bodies pressed close, with their arms around each other. So much of that seems to have gotten chipped away – by what, Levi can’t quite say. It seems a long time since they were able to show each other any of that kindness that they once shared daily, and Levi doesn’t know if it’s something he should try to fix, something he *could* fix if he wanted to, or if it’s just something they’ve grown into, or rather something they’ve grown out of. He never thought of Farlan as a substitute for anything even if he often suspected he himself was just that, a bad replacement for Christofer, someone for Farlan to cling onto while he had no one better.

“You’re right about that,” Marie admits and sighs. “Oh, how I wish I could stay with all of you here sometimes.”

“Are you out of your mind?” Levi asks, scoffing quietly. “We’re all going crazy here.”

“Speak for yourself,” Farlan mutters, making Levi scoff more loudly. “I’ve told you, other than for that blasted faucet leaking, I don’t mind staying here. It’s better than how we lived before. We have everything we need, and we’re a lot safer here. I don’t understand why you complain all the time.”

“People aren’t supposed to live like this,” Levi tells him sourly. “All cooped up, like animals. Even Isabel—”

“The only one who is constantly complaining is you,” Farlan interrupts him. “Isabel and I are fine. It’s *you* who keeps walking around the apartment like a headless chicken. Why can’t you just stay still for a minute? Just lie down, close your eyes and think about the good times if being here is so insufferable.”

Levi wants to throw something back at Farlan, but he doesn’t know how to say he has already thought of the good times, all eight months of them, and they’ve made him feel nothing but hollow and helpless. So he stays quiet instead, turning his eyes on the hands he’s crossed on the table, listening to the uncomfortable silence that falls between them.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think,” Marie whispers. “It must be difficult for—”

“No, *we* should apologise,” Farlan tells her quickly, and Levi can feel him casting a glance in his direction. “We’re all just a bit on edge here.”

“And who can blame you?” she says. “You know I’ve had to stay at home a lot ever since I became a mother, and even that is taxing. I should have been more careful with my words. All I meant was that I miss all of your company when I’m not here.”

“And we miss you Marie,” Isabel tells her cheerfully, “and little Sofie-sweetness. Please come visit again soon!”

“They only just got here,” Levi reminds Isabel, her enthusiasm lifting his mood some.

“I know,” Isabel says sheepishly. “I just don’t want them to leave.”

“Oh, my sweetling!” Marie says, wrapping both Isabel and Sofie in a tight embrace. “I don’t want to leave either! I wish I could just... take you all with me when I go!”

She stays for another hour or so and Levi brews them all a pot of tea from their diminishing supply; he notices Marie only accepting half a cup, but decides not to say anything about it. They talk about past summers and other such pleasant things, like trying to push the real world aside for the rest of her visit. It seems to do both Farlan and Isabel a world of good; after Marie finally leaves she pulls a heavy history book from the shelf and starts flipping through the pages, not reading but looking at the black-and-white pictures of vases and columns and buildings. Farlan on the other hand walks over to the secretaire and pulls an empty sheet of paper from the drawer.

“Is this a leap year?” he asks Levi, picking up the clock to wind it. “I can’t remember.”

“I don’t think so,” Levi tells him, watching him turn the hands to quarter past three. “Why?”

“I remembered to ask Marie the date,” the other man replies, sitting down in front of the secretaire and starting to draw a rudimentary calendar. “It’s the thirteenth already. Can you believe it?”

“I would have guessed the eighth,” Levi says quietly, leaving Farlan to his lines and numbers to go silently wash the dishes in the kitchen.

The thought fills his mind against his will as he rubs at the tea stains on the cups with the dish rag: it’s been almost a month since they last heard from Erwin, give or take a few days. Marie’s earlier words come to him in the silence, what she said about waiting and wondering. It seems unfair that seeing her always makes Levi think of him; it’d be easier to enjoy her visits if it didn’t, and maybe then he could find whatever comfort the others do in her presence. Drying the cups he remembers suddenly the first time he came to the apartment, sneaking in through the open window when Erwin was gone, going through the cupboards and scrubbing the floors like a lunatic. Levi can’t understand why he did any of that now; he must have been more than a little out of his mind to do something so senseless.

He leaves behind the *drip drip drip* of the faucet only to have his ears filled with the quiet ticking of the clock in the sitting room. As he takes a seat on the sofa he suddenly feels as though things were better before, when he couldn’t tell exactly how long he had spent doing nothing. Without anything else to occupy his time, he leans his head against the backrest and closes his eyes, realising after a moment that he’s stopped to listen to the way the dripping and the ticking sounds intertwine, falling sometimes simultaneously before growing apart again. Levi exhales heavily through his nose and rubs at his eyes, glancing at the clock disinterestedly: only five to four.

He manages to spend an hour doing his exercises, and it takes him until the last set of push-ups to realise he’s doing it all for the second time that day. He washes himself slowly, savouring that scent of lavender for as long as he can before it all starts to feel excessive. He casts a longing look at the bathtub, remembers the afternoons when he came in from the cold just to sink his body into the steaming water, Erwin bringing him tea and biscuits and sitting by the tub until he was done. Right now Levi can’t tell if the thought is more bitter or sweet and he pushes it out of his mind when he returns to the sitting room to waste more time, to sit in silence, to try to outrun his memories.

At eight o’clock, Farlan cooks them a modest supper which they eat while playing games of klüberjass at the candlelit table; a ghost of the evenings they spent in their own kitchen, teasing each other, exchanging stories, even laughing. It too seems so distant here, like the silence has made different people out of them, like they’re still strangers in this apartment – and it’s true Levi still thinks of it as Erwin’s home rather than his own, like they’re all just visiting, as if Erwin’s going to come back one of these days and make them feel they shouldn’t overstay their welcome. Both Isabel and Farlan’s expressions look weary in the dim light, like they too feel uneasy bringing their past life here.

They move back to the sitting room when Isabel starts nodding off, and though Levi tells her to go to bed, she insists on lying down on the sofa instead, telling him she doesn’t want to sleep alone. With nothing else to do, Levi and Farlan continue playing, sitting cross-legged on the floor and listening to Isabel’s restless breathing in the silence. She seems to be sleeping poorly, turning this way and that, until she suddenly sits up, wide-eyed and eerily quiet as she stares ahead of herself in the dark.

“What is it?” Farlan asks the girl; it seems to take her a moment to register the words.

“I...” she starts, her words trailing off as she gets up from the sofa and turns toward the window, frowning. “I think... I had a bad dream...”

Levi and Farlan share a confused glance as Isabel stands still, head poised as if to listen for something in the distance before she starts to cross the room, slowly walking up to the window. She stops in front of it and leans forward, her expression dazed and grim as she reaches out her hand, her fingers brushing against the fabric of the curtain gently before she grabs it and starts pulling it aside to peer out onto the street.

“Isabel,” Levi whispers, suddenly becoming aware of the candles in the room. “Don’t open—”

The blaring of sirens cuts him short and makes them all jump as Levi and Farlan get quickly on their feet, staring at each other for a moment as if rooted to the floor.

“Isabel,” Levi finally says, coming to his senses. “Get away from the window. We need to—”

“I don’t want to go in the pantry,” she tells him, her voice pleading. “Please, big brother, I don’t want to—”

“It’s the safest place for us,” Farlan whispers calmly, putting his arm around her. “We have to. I know you don’t like it but we have no other choice.”

“Farlan, please, I don’t want to—”

“It’s going to be alright,” he tells her, taking her hand in his. “Everything’s going to be alright, I promise. It’s just like all the other times, we’ll just stay in for a little while and then we can all go to bed and try to get some sleep. I’ll explain some of the things in your history book for you, if you want.”

Slowly and hesitantly Isabel takes a step forward, following Levi and Farlan into the pantry where they all sit down, backs pressed against the shelves, facing each other and the single candle between them. Isabel keeps staring at the floor, shoulders rigid and hands slack in her lap and it seems she’s not really seeing anything at all. Farlan and Levi look at each other, both of their faces etched with worry. Levi can feel his heart beating wildly in his chest as he holds his breath to listen, hearing nothing but the last few footsteps in the stairwell before the basement door closes with a resolute, echoing bang.

“Everything’s going to be fine,” Farlan whispers again, and Levi can’t tell to whom he’s saying it. “It’s just another false alarm.”

Levi nods, not really caring if Farlan sees it or not; his focus has moved back to Isabel who wraps her arms around her knees and presses her head toward her lap. She’s muttering something under her breath, and it takes him a long time to hear anything beyond that susurrations, especially the sound he’s been dreading: the low, droning hum of approaching planes.

“Can you hear—” Farlan starts, but Levi shushes him quiet, though he knows without listening that the sound is getting louder.

“It’ll probably be like last time,” he mutters as he sees the fear on Farlan’s face. “They’ll have a target and they’ll focus on that. The Albertstadt, probably.”

Farlan gives him a shaky nod and they grow silent, eyes darting about the room as they try to avoid seeing the apprehension on each other’s faces in the dim light. The sirens fall quiet and they wait, minutes ticking by and melting into each other until Levi has lost track of them again. He’s so focused on hearing that low rumbling boom of explosions that when the sudden sound of hurried footsteps in the stairwell ends with a knock on their door, it takes him a moment to realise the threat behind it.

“Is that Marie?” Farlan asks him in a hasty whisper. “Could it b—”

Levi shushes him again, standing up and listening, willing the footsteps to move on to another door, hoping they belong to someone who’s simply looking for shelter but knowing they would hardly run straight to the second floor. He takes a step forward, glancing at Farlan and Isabel’s upturned faces, starting when the knocks sound out again, louder and longer than before, like whoever is behind the door has switched from using their knuckles to using their fist. Levi hesitates for another few seconds before picking up a hammer from the shelf and walking out into the kitchen, casting a glance back at Farlan and Isabel and mouthing “stay here”; beyond the loudening hum of the planes, he can hear them both shuffling out of the pantry after him.

Levi weighs the hammer in his hand as he moves on to the sitting room, doing his best to wave Isabel and Farlan back to the kitchen, resigning when he sees them settling by the double doors behind him. He sneaks toward the door soundlessly, the banging sound piercing the silence again, followed by something that makes Levi’s stomach drop.

“Levi. It’s me. Open the door.”

Levi stops dead in his tracks, his breath hitching in his throat at the thought, the chance, the possibility.

“Is that...” Farlan gasps behind him and Levi takes another step forward, lowering the hammer as he reaches for the lock and handle, and opens the door.

With a few long strides, Erwin has entered the apartment, and all Levi gets is a couple of seconds to look at him and take in all the troubling things about his appearance; the dirty uniform under the tattered overcoat, the wealth of dry mud that he’s carrying in on his boots, the way strands of his greasy, unkempt hair fall over his eyes. His expression nears anger in its seriousness, and something about the forceful way he walks past him makes Levi shudder.

“What are you doing here?” he asks the man who barely gives him a glance as he walks straight ahead and toward the kitchen. “I thought you were—”

“We need to go,” Erwin merely states, turning on the lights as he marches into the kitchen; the sudden brightness makes Levi blink and narrow his eyes as he looks up at the man. “Get

your things, we don't have much time."

Levi glances back at Farlan and Isabel who have followed them to the doorway to the kitchen, and he can tell their confusion is mirrored on his own face.

"Erwin," he says, walking toward the man who has pulled up a sack from the corner of the pantry and started filling it with anything his hands can reach on the shelves. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be—"

"We don't have time for this, Levi," Erwin cuts him short, moving back into the kitchen to go through the cupboards, pulling down all the food he can find, tearing down dishes that crash onto the floor. "I told you, go pack your things. Warm clothes, only what you need, all the food you can find."

"What the fuck for?" Levi asks him, feeling his confusion growing toward a panic as he tries to avoid stepping onto the pieces of broken porcelain now littering the floor. "Erwin, there's an air raid. We can't just go running out. What about the plan? What about—"

"I told you," the man grunts, turning to glare at him. "There's no time. We have to go. Tell Farlan and Isabel to go pack—"

"You're not making any fucking sense," Levi interrupts him angrily. "Where are we supposed to go? What are we supposed to—"

"Will you just do as you're fucking told for once?!"

The tone of Erwin's voice makes Levi flinch and draw back but the distress he feels is soon taken over by a realisation that makes his blood run cold. As he looks up at Erwin he sees it, plain beyond the anger and far more ominous: Erwin is afraid.

"You all need to pack your things – now," Erwin tells him more calmly. "As many warm clothes as you can, nothing you don't need. Is this all the food there is?"

All Levi can do is nod, the man's words ringing in his mind as he turns to Farlan and Isabel. "Do as he says," he tells them hurriedly. "Pack your things, right now, just... Anything warm you can find, just go and get everything..."

He follows them into the bedroom, only realising how badly his hands are shaking when he pulls the old duffel bag out of the closet and starts to fill it with clothes in such a daze he folds the first few before he starts to think and shoves the rest of them in. Next to him Farlan is packing the suitcase, throwing in this and that until Levi rushes over to help him.

"What's happening?" Farlan whispers to him, glancing toward the sitting room as if worried Erwin will hear. "Where are we—"

"I don't know," Levi admits, spreading out a pile of woolly jumpers before calling out for Isabel. "All we can do now is trust Erwin."

"But he seems like—" Farlan starts, his words cut off when Isabel joins them and hands her clothes to Levi, who places them quickly in the suitcase before shutting it with difficulty and

carrying it into the sitting room.

“Is that everything?” Erwin asks them hurriedly but Farlan and Isabel are still running from room to room, filling Levi’s duffel bag with things they can’t leave behind. From the corner of his eye Levi can see Isabel pulling her U-Boats from the shoe box and folding them up before pushing them into her pocket until Erwin catches his attention in the way he keeps glancing at the clock. “We can’t stay any longer. We need to go.”

“Farlan!” Levi calls out into the kitchen and takes Isabel by her hand, waiting until the man appears before starting to lead her out the door.

“Where are we going, big brother?” she asks him in a nervous whisper, but Levi merely shakes his head.

They’ve barely run into Erwin on the first floor landing when Farlan throws down the suitcase, his hurried gasp audible in the quiet stairwell.

“My letters!” he exclaims, starting to run up the stairs; Erwin’s grip on Levi’s shoulder stops him from following.

“I’ll wait for him,” he tells Levi sternly; there’s something strange about the light falling across his face. “You get Isabel and your things into the car.”

Levi nods, just making out the sound of the basement door opening as he’s about to step outside.

“Herr Sturmbannführer?” the nosy old woman Levi ran into months ago calls out quietly, gaze shifting between Erwin and Levi and Isabel. “Is that you? We heard a commotion and thought someone might be looting.”

“You should go back,” Erwin tells his neighbour sternly. “There’s an air raid.”

“Yes, I know,” the woman says, still looking apprehensively at Levi and Isabel. “Aren’t you going to join us, Herr Sturmbannführer?”

Erwin shakes his head, his foot already on the lowest step. “Go back to the basement, Frau Preißner.”

The woman gives them all one last confused look before closing the door behind her. Levi turns around as well, stepping out onto the street and squinting in the eerie brightness that forces his eyes up. Above the rooftops, shining against the thin veil of clouds he sees little greenish lights, like clusters of stars that fall slowly closer and closer, like glowing leaves in a gentle summer breeze; the sight makes his insides twist with fear. Isabel has stopped to stare too, and Levi gives her a push toward the car, telling her to climb onto the backseat. He puts everything he can fit into the trunk and the sack of food next to Isabel, hovering by the car until he sees Erwin and Farlan appear through the doorway.

“Get in,” Erwin tells him, pushing Farlan along as his eyes shift upward toward the flares.

“What are they?” he asks, but Levi and Erwin are both getting into the car, and his question goes unanswered by all but the roar of the planes.

They start driving, and it never occurs to Levi to look back at the building as it disappears from sight. It’s quiet in the car, so quiet Levi thinks he can still hear the low humming beyond the engine as Erwin speeds along the eerily empty streets. Here and there Levi can see people rushing along to find shelter, or people who have stopped to stare up at the green and silver lights that fall closer and closer to the roofs of the buildings they’re illuminating with that soft, unearthly glow. It seems to Levi Erwin is driving by any roads he can fit the car onto, even squeezing through a narrow alleyway between two buildings, always heading in the same direction; toward the railway station, and the river.

“Erwin,” Levi says quietly, looking at the stony expression on his face and the way his hands are gripping the steering wheel. “Where are we—”

“Not now, Levi,” Erwin merely grunts, hissing something under his breath in his own language as his eyes catch something outside.

Levi turns to look as well. High above the buildings he can see new flares, shining bright red over the green and white and falling fast somewhere on Friedrichstadt, exactly where they’re heading. Tires squealing, Erwin takes a right, barely managing to swerve out of the way of another vehicle that’s driving toward them. Levi grabs his arm for support as the momentum throws him left and something about the feel of Erwin’s skin under his hand makes Levi realise he really has come back.

“They look like trees...” Isabel mutters, looking up to the sky through her window, and then Levi sees it too, how the pattern in which the lights are falling resembles flaming red spruces.

“What is happening?” Farlan asks in a hollow whisper; the red glow of the flares makes his eyes look sunken and dark. “What are those lights? What is this? What—

“Farlan,” Levi says flatly, staring straight ahead at the road, just like Erwin is. “Don’t.”

With this the quiet returns to the car until Erwin swears again, slowing down and frowning in a way that makes Levi uneasy.

“What is it?” he asks quickly and Erwin shakes his head, shifting to reverse and backing up in the empty street.

“Shouldn’t go near the railway station, it’ll be in absolute chaos. And it’ll be smarter driving by the river.”

Erwin shifts the gear and turns to the right as Levi thinks of his words, thinks of why it’ll be smarter to go by the river. Once the bombs start falling the buildings will start collapsing. More open space means less chance of getting buried under a pile of rubble.

“Why the Altstadt?” Levi asks in a voice he hopes is too quiet for Farlan and Isabel to hear. “Why not the barracks in the Albertstadt? Why not the marshalling yards?”

Erwin is quiet for a long time before he mutters, “The houses are old and the streets narrow. It’ll catch more quickly that way.”

Levi doesn’t need to ask him to explain his words. He looks around himself, at the buildings rising either side, at the glimpse of the dome of the Frauenkirche he can catch between the roofs every now and again, imagines flames where there still are none, sees the city burning already. Suddenly none of it feels real, the car, Erwin beside him, the sack of food between Isabel and Farlan on the backseat. Have they really just left everything behind again? Are they really leaving Dresden? The thought makes Levi’s breath fall short as a wave of panic claws at his insides. He should be used to this, the thought of uprooting his life shouldn’t feel like anything. And still...

They drive by the Zwinger palace. A tramcar has stopped in its tracks on the road, the seats empty as people have ran out at the sound of the alarms. Levi can see more of them here, people who have been out on the town, running their errands, meeting their friends, far from air raid shelters, too far from home. Levi looks at them as they drive past toward the Semperoper and the Katholische Hofkirche; he remembers the mission, how he looked for Osterhaus on the square in the dim light, his finger aching from the cold metal of the trigger. Behind him Farlan turns toward the church, muttering prayers under his breath.

They reach the banks of the river, turning away from the Augustus Bridge where another tramcar stands empty and straight toward the glow of the red lights ahead. Levi looks at Erwin, wanting to ask him about the direction they’re taking but deciding to stay quiet when he sees the man’s expression. They pass by cars; some have been stopped by the side of the street as their drivers have gotten out to stare in the direction of the flares, as if unsure whether they should try to find shelter or keep driving.

“What are you doing?” Farlan suddenly barks at Erwin from the backseat. “Why are you driving that way? Are you out of your fucking mind?! You can’t just—”

“Look!”

They turn where Isabel is pointing her finger. Straight ahead on the horizon a swarm of planes has started its descent toward the city, hundreds of little dots sketched out against the clouds. Next to Levi Erwin swears loudly as he takes a left, shifting the gear and speeding up along the road.

“What are you doing?!” Farlan shouts again. “Turn around! For fuck’s sake, turn around, you’re going to get us all ki—”

“Shut up, Farlan!” Levi yells, heart hammering in his chest, hands shaking even after he clenches them into fists. “Just shut up!”

He glances again at Erwin, shuddering at the cold determination in his expression that makes him decide against speaking up. They drive along between buildings, the planes hidden from view. They pass a mother dragging her two children along by their hands and Isabel presses her face again the window, following them with her eyes. Little ways ahead of them, a burnt-out flare falls down onto the street along with its parachute. The moment of calm is terrifying, unnatural.

When it finally happens, Levi can't tell if he hears it or feels it, the sound is so low and followed so closely by others like it that soon Levi can't tell them apart. He can see buildings disappearing up ahead, replaced by flames and high pillars of smoke. The whining sound of the falling bombs fills all the silence left by the explosions, mixing with Farlan's quiet praying. Levi can see the Marien Bridge ahead, the top of it dotted here and there with people and cars heading away from the explosions. A part of him wants to ask Erwin whether they'll make it but he knows Erwin can't answer that question any better than he himself can.

Just as they drive up to the bridge, an explosion shakes the ground a few hundred meters behind them. The blast wave hits the car and breaks the windows; Erwin has barely enough time to warn them, and as Levi ducks he can see the man lifting his arms to shield his own face. The car starts swerving toward the right, rising up to the sidewalk and scraping along the railing before finally stopping as it gently hits a streetlight. In the absence of the sound of the engine, the thunderous crashing of the bombs fills their ears in a flood that feels deafening.

"Everyone alright?"

Levi hears the question like it's coming from far away and turns slowly to look up at Erwin and then back to Farlan and Isabel, both of whom look to be in one piece save for a few cuts and scrapes. He nods at Erwin who hurries to start the engine, steering back onto the street and driving until a small crowd moving along the bridge forces him to slow down. Some of the people have stopped walking, having stopped instead at the overlooks to stare at the city beyond the river. Levi looks at it too. Straight ahead where the Elbe makes its bend he can see the arches of the Augustus Bridge, following them with his eyes to catch the high dome of the Frauenkirche next to the spire of the Katholische Hofkirche. He can see more planes passing over the buildings, dropping bombs that explode into columns of fire, and when the wind turns toward the river he can smell the smoke, can feel the sudden warmth of it on his face and hear the whooshing rumble of the storm.

"Everything's burning..." Isabel mutters behind him, and Levi shudders.

While they're crossing the bridge, Levi turns to look ahead, still seeing the flickering light of the flames as it bounces off the shards of glass that litter the dashboard. Even Farlan falls quiet as the line of cars and people moves along, finally dispersing along the bank of the river. Erwin turns the car again toward their previous course – northwest, in Levi's estimation – until he is again forced to stop when a pile of rubble blocks their path. Levi can see where it has chipped off a nearby building.

"Help me clear this," Erwin tells Levi after a moment's hesitation, and though the worst of the urgency is gone from his voice, Levi wastes no time in following him as he steps out of the car.

Isabel joins them quickly as they start moving the heavy stones to the side of the road, helping in clearing out the smaller pieces. When Levi looks back he can see Farlan doing his best to get the worst of the glass off the seats; he's wrapped his hand in a shirt to protect it from further cuts. It's all Levi can do to keep up with Erwin, who is growing breathless from the speed with which he works to get them on their way. After a while he calls Farlan over too and they all work in silence, as if afraid saying something will make them say it all.

They're almost done with their work when something suddenly catches Levi's eye: a dark figure running out from the doorway of a nearby building. Before Levi can make a sound, the stranger has jumped onto the driver's seat, sending Levi running to cross the short distance. By the time he reaches the car, the engine has roared back to life, leaving him grasping for a hold on the frame of the driver's side window. The pieces of glass still jutting out from the metal scratch the palms of his hands and as the car jumps forward Levi falls, landing onto his left leg that twists badly under his weight. Beyond the pain Levi is distantly aware of the car having stopped, of Erwin reaching into it through the window and pulling out a man, of Erwin throwing him on the ground and beginning to hit him, again and again and again. Levi pushes hurriedly to his feet, wincing as he lays his weight on the left one but running forward nonetheless, rushing to grab a hold of Erwin's arm before the man can land another punch, calling out his name when Erwin merely shakes him off.

"Stop it, Erwin! Stop it!" Levi shouts, and only that seems to bring the man back to the present, to look at his bloodied knuckles as if he's barely seeing them. "Leave it. We need to go."

Without giving the stranger another glance, Erwin turns back toward the car and sits behind the wheel. Levi follows him nearly as hesitantly as Farlan and Isabel, stopping to help the man walk over to the side of the building where he falls onto the ground, holding his hands to his broken and bruised face. Levi doesn't look back when they start driving again, merely notes dully how quiet the city has grown now that the explosions have stopped.

Levi's eyes are so fixed on Erwin that he doesn't notice they've left the city until the darkness outside his window starts feeling wider and he begins to register the scents of wet grass and damp earth. Even then it takes him a long while to realise he's seen this place before, though it feels as if it must have happened in another life; the four of them driving up to the cottage, heading northwest along the Elbe, Isabel excited beyond words, Farlan and Erwin discussing politics on the way, laughing as they disagree. He glances again at Erwin, the hardness of his expression, the trail of dried blood leading down to his wrist from his knuckles, and suddenly he wishes he didn't have time to notice all these new things about the man: how gaunt his features have grown, as if he's not been eating properly since he left, how deep his frown is, how much like a stranger the untidy stubble on his face makes him look.

They come to the roadblock; the boom is still in its place but no one's there, the guardsman's booth standing dark and empty, but even here the burning city paints the wood red. Erwin steps out of the car to lift the boom, leaving it open after he's driven through.

"Wait. Are we..." Isabel suddenly speaks up, the anguish in her voice making Levi turn around at once. "No! You can't do that!"

She reaches for the handle on her door, pulling it open and jumping out of the car; Levi can see her stumbling on the ground for a few seconds before she starts running back toward the city.

"Isabel!" he calls out, catching her silhouette against the glow of the city in the distance.

Before Levi can make a move, Erwin has stopped the car and leapt out. Levi sees him running after her until he too disappears from view, but Isabel's screams of protest tell Levi

when he's caught up to her. Erwin returns quickly, half carrying and half dragging Isabel and shoving her back into the car before closing the door so loudly another little piece of glass falls onto the floor. As soon as he sits back on the driver's seat, Isabel starts hitting him wherever she can reach: on his shoulders, on his chest, on the sides of his head.

"You can't just leave them!" she screams at him, her tear-stained face contorting with anger. "You bastard! You can't just let them—"

"Stop that, Isabel!" Levi yells back at her, clutching her wrist and pushing her down on the backseat. "Stop it!"

She slumps against the sack of food, burying her face in her hands and muttering something under her breath in a language Levi's never heard before. Next to him Erwin starts the car again and begins driving along the quiet road, his expression still more anger than anything else. Before he turns back around on his seat, Levi sees Farlan laying his hand on Isabel's head, silent tears falling down his cheeks so peacefully it seems he doesn't even notice them.

Levi soon loses track of how long they've been driving, staring out into the darkness that seems to be getting deeper as the night grows older. No one says anything, the car is full of Isabel's quiet singing as she hums to herself, eyes distant and fingers reaching, as if she thinks she's playing with someone's hair. None of it seems real to Levi, least of all Erwin, that he's here, what he's done.

They finally stop at an isolated stretch of road between the river and a patch of forest. When Levi glances at the fuel indicator, he can see the tank is almost empty. He follows Erwin as he steps out of the car and helps Farlan and Isabel out as well.

"Get your things," Erwin says, lighting a cigarette and pulling the heavy suitcase out of the trunk before turning to Levi. "How's your leg? Can you walk?"

Levi nods without speaking though as soon as he takes a step the pain makes him wince. Erwin has already turned to Farlan and Isabel, and Levi decides to keep his mouth shut when the man tells him and Farlan to help him with the car. Together they start pushing it, straining to get it over the edge and rolling down the gentle slope and into the river. They stand there for a moment watching it sink into the blackness of the water before Erwin picks up the suitcase again and nods for them all to follow. Levi swings the duffel bag onto his shoulder and makes sure Farlan does the same with the sack of food.

They start walking toward the patch of forest, diving quickly into the darkness under the leafless branches that sway and creak above in a gentle breeze. When a wisp of cloud moves on from blocking the moon, Levi can see his breath fogging up in the night air. The grass and dead leaves under their feet have a coating of frost, and already Levi can feel his toes beginning to ache with the cold. He turns up the collars of his coat and glances back at Farlan and Isabel, both of whom he can see shivering against the dull orange glow still visible far in the horizon.

They walk for hours, stumbling over fallen down branches and rabbit holes, their frost-numb feet slipping on the carpet of frozen leaves. Levi can feel his foot aching more and more after every step until he's forced to grit his teeth to keep from groaning from pain. The ache combined with the exertion makes him sweat, but the wetness of his clothes soon catches the chill from the air and makes him shudder. He can hear Farlan sniffing behind him, but doesn't turn to look to see if it's due to tears or the cold.

"You three will wait here," Erwin finally says, placing the suitcase on the ground next to a tree stump. "I'll go ahead and make sure the cottage is empty."

"I'll come with you," Levi tells him at once, throwing his bag next to the suitcase before turning to Farlan and Isabel. "Get some more clothes, try to keep warm."

"Levi—" Erwin starts, but Levi cuts him short.

"We shouldn't waste time," he merely says, walking past Erwin who follows him without arguing further.

They march on side by side, crossing the first kilometre to the cottage without saying a word. And what could they say? Levi feels numb and empty, and from the expression on Erwin's face he can guess the man isn't feeling much different.

"Do you think someone will be there?" Levi still asks him in a whisper when he finally catches a glimpse of the crooked little fence, and the patch of vegetable garden beyond it.

"No lights in the windows," Erwin whispers back, peering through the trees at the cottage. "That could just be caution."

"Do you think we'll need to fight?" Levi asks, thinking of his leg. "We have nowhere else to go, do we?"

"We'll either have to stay here, or get the supplies I left in the cellar," Erwin tells him. "We won't last very long out in the wild as we are."

Levi nods, limping quietly after Erwin to the fence, wincing as he hops over it. They cross the bare garden soundlessly, Levi stopping to peer in through the window as Erwin listens at the door.

"I don't see anything out of the ordinary," Levi mutters, taking in the white sheets on the sofa and armchairs. "All the furniture's still covered."

Erwin fits the old key into the rusty lock and turns it, stepping into the cottage, his body poised and alert. Together they go through all the room and find no one, just cobwebs and dust and silence. Levi follows Erwin into the kitchen, finding him a candle which he lights quickly before descending into the cellar. While he's down there Levi lights more candles, setting them in a tainted brass candelabra on the small rectangular table. He can see Erwin's expression better in the soft glow of the flames, and something about the tight line of the man's mouth makes Levi grow wary as he watches him standing by the cellar door, still as if carved from stone.

Without warning Erwin lifts his hand and throws the candleholder across the room; it lands in the sink with a loud clatter, cracking the porcelain where it smashes against the side of the basin. Levi takes a few hurried steps back, eyes wide as he follows Erwin. The words pouring out of the man's mouth are foreign and full of hate, turning into angry growls when Erwin starts punching the wall, the stones coloured red by the blood pouring out of the score of freshly-opened wounds already covering his knuckles. Finally he turns away, kicking at a chair and sitting down on it heavily, panting with rage as Levi looks on, frozen on his spot by the door.

"Fucking Darlett," Erwin mutters, lighting a cigarette and smoking on it jerkily, brushing a rough hand through his hair. "He's going to get us all killed."

Levi feels a hurt in his chest as he looks at Erwin, a panicked ache that makes him realise at this moment he can't see anything of the man he knew before, of the gentle smiles and kind words, of the honesty and patience, and love. He wishes he wanted to take a step forward, to cross the room and sit next to Erwin, to wash out the blood from his hand and dress his wounds, but there's something so forbidding about the rigidity of the man's posture that Levi can't bring himself to move any closer.

"Go get Farlan and Isabel," Erwin finally orders without giving Levi so much as a glance. "I need to think."

Levi obeys without delay, leaving the cottage behind as he follows their earlier route to the others. He finds them huddled together, sitting on the suitcase and shivering from cold. When he walks forward Isabel stands up slowly, handing him a heavy branch she's found God knows where.

"Because of your leg," she mutters, showing Levi how to lean on the makeshift walking stick.

They walk back slowly with Levi hobbling ahead and leading the way. None of them speak, there's no other sound but the soft shuffling of their footsteps and the occasional *crack* of a branch or twig breaking underfoot. It's only then that Levi begins to feel homeless, realising whatever he threw into that green duffel bag of his is all he has left in the world besides the clothes on his back. He can hear Farlan panting as he struggles with the suitcase, wanting to comfort him by saying they don't have far to go now, but the words get stuck in his throat; Erwin's anger at the missing supplies makes Levi fear this was never meant to be a permanent solution.

They stumble tiredly into the cottage that feels warmer now than it did before. Erwin has deserted his earlier place at the table and gotten fires going in the kitchen and the sitting room. Levi finds him standing by the stove, stirring a pot of thin porridge; he's bandaged and washed his hand, albeit clumsily, and when Levi walks closer he manages a weak smile.

"How are they?" Erwin asks, nodding toward Farlan and Isabel who have both sunk onto the sofa, too tired to stretch out their hands toward the warmth of the fire.

Levi merely shrugs, not knowing what to say.

“You should all eat something,” Erwin tells him quietly. “And we all need some rest.”

“Have you eaten?” Levi asks him, lowering his voice to a whisper after Erwin nods and continuing, “How long can we stay here for?”

“I don’t know,” Erwin admits, glancing again at Farlan and Isabel and sighing. “For as long as we have to.”

“What happened?” Levi blurts out, not being able to hold his tongue any longer. “You were at the front. How did you—”

“Please, Levi,” Erwin mutters tiredly, moving the pot off the stove. “I’ll explain everything. Just...not tonight.”

Levi nods wordlessly and portions the porridge into three bowls which he carries into the sitting room. Farlan accepts his hungrily, but Isabel draws her knees to her chest and locks her arms around them, turning her head away.

“I don’t want any,” she insists, making Levi frown in frustration.

“I know you’re hungry,” he tries but Isabel refuses again.

“I don’t want anything that *he* made,” she tells him angrily, pressing her mouth into a tight line and turning to stare stubbornly at the fire.

Levi looks up at Erwin who has started hanging sheets of heavy fabric in front of the windows, and from the man’s slumped posture he can tell he’s heard the girl’s words.

“Stop being stupid and eat,” Levi tells her, shoving the bowl onto her lap and taking a seat in the armchair but deciding quickly to eat alone in the kitchen instead; the way Isabel and Farlan are both trying to avoid looking at Erwin makes him fear he’ll say something he’ll come to regret later.

“You shouldn’t be so hard on her,” Erwin tells Levi as he joins him at the kitchen table.

“You saved her life,” Levi replies sullenly, scraping the bottom of his bowl clean with his spoon. “She should show some fucking gratitude.”

“She’s in shock,” Erwin whispers. “You all are. It’s not surprising she would say something like that.”

“Shock or not, that’s fucking disrespectful,” Levi insists, eating the rest of his porridge and taking his bowl to the sink, trying not to see the crack left behind by the candleholder.

Erwin walks over to him slowly, glancing toward the sitting room before leaning closer to whisper, “I thought it would be best if I stayed awake while you three sleep – keep guard.”

“Don’t be an idiot. You look like you’re on the brink of fucking death,” Levi tells him sternly, only now realising the stinging stench of sweat coming off the man. “And on top of that, you stink.”

“Levi–”

“Seriously, you fucking reek,” Levi says, grateful for this moment of something familiar. “You’re not going to fight off anyone as you are. Do we even have any weapons?”

“But if–”

“We’ll take our chances tonight,” Levi decides, hoping his voice leaves no room for disagreement. “Like you said, we all need some rest.”

Whatever resolve Erwin had left seems to have been crushed by Levi’s words, and the determination in his expression is soon replaced by gentle gratitude. “We’ll need to come up with a plan tomorrow,” Erwin says, and Levi nods in agreement.

“Not as badly as you need to wash yourself. Honestly, I feel like I should just go ahead and burn your clothes rather than try and get them clean,” he mutters, savouring the flash of a smile on Erwin’s lips as he retreats obediently into the bathroom.

Levi carries a few quilts and pillows into the sitting room for Farlan and Isabel, who have both finished their bowls of porridge. They’re sitting at the opposite ends of the sofa, staring mutely into the fireplace as if in some trance, from which they only wake when Levi drops the piles of blankets between them.

“You should sleep out here tonight,” he tells them, nodding toward the bunch of firewood by the hearth. “Keep yourselves warm, and go wash up in the bathroom. We’ll be in the bedroom if anything comes up.”

“How can you stand it?” Farlan asks Levi in a hollow whisper, staring at him like he’s out of his mind. “How can you stand sleeping next to one of them after what they’ve done?”

As the wave of sadness crashes over him, Levi suddenly wishes he could still feel angry about Farlan’s words. Finding nothing to say, he turns away in silence, washing himself quickly before joining Erwin in their room, only letting his exhaustion take over when his head hits the pillow.

“Why didn’t you tell me you hurt your leg?” Erwin asks him quietly and Levi shakes his head.

“I didn’t want to slow us down,” he explains meekly, letting Erwin lift his left leg onto his lap; the pain makes him draw a quick breath as soon as Erwin puts pressure on his ankle.

Without saying anything further, Erwin starts to wind a long bandage tightly around Levi’s leg, leaning the foot against his shoulder, his touches gentle yet firm. Levi watches him from the slit between his lids, letting the sight of Erwin’s wet hair and bare chest remind him of when they were last here, of that closeness and comfort and pleasure they found together then, how this place felt like it belonged to both of them. He thinks back to the night they parted, at the roughness of Erwin’s hands when they ran out of time, how empty those touches left him, how sure he was then that their paths would never cross again.

And here they are.

Levi presses his leg closer to Erwin's face, letting the man run the tips of his fingers along it down to his thigh. Their eyes lock in the darkness, free of questions and hesitation, suddenly remembering nothing but their time apart. Levi slides his leg forward, hooking it behind Erwin's back and pulling the man closer before rolling on top of him, showing his impatience between his legs. He keeps his eyes on Erwin as the man watches him, lets him pull down his underwear and feels no shame in it. Levi can feel the freedom in his body, the complete lack of borders and lines and restrictions. He wants to show Erwin all of it, wants to make it clear in his eager kisses, the way he moves against Erwin, the way he guides Erwin's hands to the parts that before have not been for Erwin to touch. Levi soon grows breathless in his need to feel Erwin closer, in his need for release, and the touches that minutes before were gentle and pleading turn demanding and hasty, as if all the tension of the day was still coursing through his veins. It's only when Erwin finally pushes Levi onto his back and begins kissing his way down to his crotch that Levi surrenders, closing his fist around the sheets rather than Erwin's hair when he finishes into the man's mouth.

He gives Erwin a moment to spit into a handkerchief before reclaiming his place on the man's thighs, moving quickly down to suck on the fleshy tip of his cock. Despite the eagerness of Levi's mouth, the hardness within it dwindles and dies, and when he turns to look up at Erwin he sees the man avoiding his gaze, eyes locked onto the wall by the bed instead. Without saying a word, Levi dries Erwin with the sheet and pulls it over them both, letting the man bury his face onto his shoulder with a heavy sigh. It takes Erwin a long time to close his eyes, something in his mind stronger than his need for sleep. Levi leans his cheek against the top of Erwin's head, hoping the closeness will be a comfort, relaxing only when he feels the man's breathing growing heavier against the skin of his neck.

When he shuts his own eyes, all Levi sees is a wall of fire.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- violence
- foul language
- sexual content

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The room has grown much cooler by the time Levi wakes in the morning, blinking in the darkness. It takes him a moment to remember where he is and what has happened, why he hasn't woken up feeling that ache in his chest at the first sight of Erwin's secretaire. He turns to see the man, but the fleeting warmth in the bed should have told him he is alone long before his eyes do. Levi can feel his brows knitting as he gets out of bed, hurrying in pulling on his clothes and above all his socks; the floor feels cold under his bare feet and the sharp pain that travels up his shin is another reminder of the previous night.

He limps quietly past the sitting room where Farlan and Isabel are still curled on the sofa; the fire in the hearth has burned down to embers, and Levi throws in a couple of logs before continuing on his way. In the kitchen the masonry oven is still giving out warmth that's gathered into the bricks and stones during the night, and the fire under the stove tells Levi Erwin has passed through here. He walks up to the window to peer outside into the winter-bleak garden, made more lifeless by the darkness of the early morning. Erwin's sitting on the steps, smoking a cigarette and staring out across the yard, his hand barely catching the smoke as if he's deep in thought. He's found a pair of trousers and a cardigan somewhere, and Levi's relieved to see the uniform still in a pile on the bathroom floor. He brews a quick pot of tea before filling two enamel mugs and carrying them outside, taking a seat next to Erwin and filling his lungs with the cold winter air. For a long time neither one of them speaks.

"Have you been awake for long?" Levi finally asks, bringing his face closer to the steaming mug when a chilly wind rises and makes him shiver.

Erwin merely shakes his head and puts out his cigarette, exhaling heavily; the smell makes Levi's heart flutter in his chest. He tries to sip his tea but burns his tongue; he can feel the impatience taking over his movements, but doesn't know how to ask Erwin about the things he feels he has to know. It seems so unkind to force Erwin to relive whatever it is that he has been through – from the man's haggard appearance Levi can guess it's been far worse than his own sheltered existence.

"Are Farlan and Isabel still asleep?" Erwin asks him quietly and Levi nods.

“At least they were just now,” he says and Erwin grunts.

“There are some plans that need to be made and I don’t know to what extent to include them,” the man tells him and sighs tiredly; it seems to chip away another little bit of that roughness that clung to him before. “What do you think?”

Levi considers the question for a moment, thinking about how much all the lying has hurt Farlan. He can’t imagine that being forced to blindly follow anything Erwin has thought up will go down well with either Farlan or Isabel right now but then, he can hardly see them making rational decisions about anything either.

“Do you have something in mind then?” he asks Erwin instead of answering. “Some kind of plan?”

Erwin sighs again. “I must admit, I have a clearer idea of what we can’t do at present than of what we can,” he says, scratching at the stubble covering his cheeks. “We can’t stay here indefinitely, and we can’t leave until your leg has healed – nor before we can get some supplies.”

“You’re worried someone will find us here?”

“It’s a possibility,” Erwin admits. “There are things we can do to limit the chance of that happening – only keep the fires burning at night, for example – but the longer we stay the greater the odds are that we’ll be discovered.”

“And that’d be bad,” Levi voices, making Erwin scoff bitterly.

“You don’t know what it’s like at the front,” he says, a hint of Holtz in his voice. “They’re executing deserters left, right and centre out there.”

Levi looks across the bleak garden at the bare-branched trees and sighs. “So we can’t stay and we can’t leave either.”

“That about sums it up, yes,” Erwin agrees, falling quiet for a long time before continuing, “And I wish it were only because of our lack of supplies.”

“What do you mean by that?” Levi inquires, keeping his curiosity at bay even when Erwin takes a moment to light another cigarette.

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you I’m not exactly supposed to be here right now,” the man starts, exhaling more smoke with each word. “My returning to Dresden was... Well, I didn’t exactly plan for it.”

“So what happened?” Levi asks him now. “Why *did* you come back?”

Erwin turns to Levi, a look in his eyes that Levi struggles to recognise: like a tiredness that approaches hurt in how all-encompassing it is. Suddenly Levi feels like an idiot for having asked something like that.

“While I was at the front I received word from central,” Erwin begins, and Levi’s relieved he seems to have ignored what he said. “I was to carry out one last mission before I was to be pulled from active duty and sent back to England.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Erwin admits. “Perhaps they thought of some future use for me that rendered me indispensable, and therefore made my presence at the front unnecessarily dangerous. In any case, they assigned the mission, which I carried out without a hitch.”

“What was it?” Levi asks, but when he hears the strained and unpleasant laugh Erwin lets out, he again wishes he hadn’t.

“They call it personnel disposal,” the man grunts, sipping at his tea in between drags off his cigarette, laughing again. “We’re really no better than the Nazis.”

“Don’t say that,” Levi tells him almost angrily and shudders, deciding not to think about Dresden, about the whistling sound the bombs made when they fell, about the sea of fire they left behind. “I’ve told you not to compare yourself to them.”

“Sorry,” Erwin simply mutters without looking at Levi. “After the mission I got in touch with the contact who was supposed to arrange my exit from the Reich. He asked me if I had been previously posted in Dresden, and happened to mention he’d heard rumours of plans for an attack on the city being in the works. So you see, I couldn’t take the chance, even if they were just rumours.”

“What did you do?”

“I took his car,” Erwin explains, putting out his cigarette. “He wasn’t very cooperative about it, so I was forced to threaten him. The time that cost me...” The man’s words trail off and he shakes his head. “Though I suppose I should feel more guilty about what taking that car meant for him. Chances are he’ll be exposed and caught now, if he hasn’t been already.”

Levi feels like repeating his earlier question: why? Why did Erwin take such a risk, and endanger someone else’s life in the process? Why did he go to such lengths to get back to Dresden? Why was he here instead of back home in England, safe and alive and far away from all of this? In the end Levi doesn’t ask, remembering that look Erwin gave him, like Levi not understanding was the worst thing he could hear right now.

“Not only did I disobey a direct order,” Erwin continues, “I also compromised the operation. I’d imagine my superiors are feeling less than impressed with my actions at present.”

“So we can’t stay here,” Levi starts again, “and we can’t leave. If the Germans find us they’ll kill us all and if the British find you they’ll... what? Put you in prison?”

“Some form of disciplinary action is required, I have no doubt,” Erwin agrees and utters a quiet laugh, like he’s found something funny in what Levi has said. “You see now what I meant when I said I have a clearer idea of all the things we can’t do.”

Levi agrees with a grunt and a hiss of a swear before asking, “So what sort of supplies would we need?”

“Something to keep us warm for one,” Erwin tells him. “A tent, preferably. We could also do with weapons. All I have is my handgun, and should we run out of food, it won’t get us very far – nor does it offer much in the way of protection.”

“I was already rationing before we left,” Levi says. “All the food would’ve lasted the three of us another three, four months or so.”

“That was very prudent of you,” Erwin compliments him quietly, turning to give him a quick smile, “but then, I expected nothing less.”

“With the apple jam in the cellar the four of us could last here at least that long,” Levi estimates, “and even if we can’t take all of the food with us we’ll be fine for a month or so, depending on how far we’ll have to go.”

“The destination’s another problem,” Erwin says. “As far as I see it, our only option is to find the camp of the partisan group that’s been assisting with the operation—”

“Is that where Nanaba and Mike went?” Levi asks, drinking his tea to keep the cold at bay.

Erwin nods. “We could stay there until the end of the war, help with the fighting. And then...”

Levi listens to Erwin’s words trailing off again, staring at the tufts of yellow grass, pale ghosts of the luscious green that grew around the well. And then, if they’re still alive, they’ll all go their separate ways, and what does that mean for Erwin with half the British army chasing after him?

“Well, I suppose there’s plenty of time for all that if we ever make it to the camp,” Erwin finally mutters. “Not to mention if we’ll ever be able to leave.”

“Do you think we’d be able to find some supplies in the village?” Levi asks and Erwin shakes his head.

“I don’t know,” he says, “and in any case, the only person we could reasonably safely send to find out is Isabel, and even that might raise some uncomfortable questions.”

Levi swears again, and for the first time in his life he feels like reaching over to the pack of cigarettes next to Erwin and lighting one for whatever calming effect they’re supposed to have.

“So what do you suggest we do?” he finally asks Erwin, who shrugs.

“Live one day at a time, I suppose,” the man replies, sounding almost absent-minded. “Like I said, we won’t be going anywhere before your leg has healed. Until then we’ll keep quiet and take stock of what supplies we have, and try to find a solution to all of this.”

Levi nods. “I guess that’s what we’ll tell Farlan and Isabel,” he says.

“I suppose there isn’t much of a plan to include them in,” Erwin mutters and laughs joylessly. “At least that’s one problem we won’t have to solve.”

“We could ask Farlan to pray for a miracle,” Levi suggests, and Erwin laughs again before emptying his mug of tea.

“All things considered, something seems to be watching over him,” Erwin muses. “Perhaps it’s not such a foolish idea after all.”

Without saying anything further they return to the kitchen where Levi thinks to get started on breakfast but realises soon that without being able to light a fire under the stove now that the bleak dawn has started to turn into the light of day, there’s not much he can do as far as a hot meal is concerned. Instead he walks down to the cellar to fetch a jar of apple jam and spreads it on some dry crackers he finds at the back of one of the lower shelves. He eats a few with Erwin and though they’re not much, they drive away the worst of the hunger that he fears will grow into a constant companion from now on.

“It’s good we made all this jam then,” Erwin mutters as he spreads some more onto his cracker before taking a bite.

“It’s good you’re smart,” Levi replies, flashing the man a quick smile that feels strange on his lips.

They fall quiet when Farlan crosses the kitchen and disappears wordlessly into the garden to visit the privy. When he returns he takes a seat at the table and starts to eat, still without saying a word, not even to complain about the food.

“Isabel’s still sleeping?” Levi asks him, surprised to see him shake his head.

“She doesn’t want to come into the kitchen,” the man explains quietly, glancing at Erwin.

Levi can feel a surge of anger in his chest that forces him to his feet, but Erwin’s hand closes quickly around his arm.

“Let her be,” Erwin whispers calmly. “She’s upset, and I don’t blame her. You should give her some time.”

“None of it was your fault,” Levi growls, glaring at the bushy red mop of hair he can just see above the backrest of the sofa. “If she’s too stupid to understand you saved her fucking life, someone should teach her better.”

“And you think you yelling at her will accomplish that?” Erwin asks him, just as quietly and calmly as before. “She’s grieving and angry, and she needs someone to blame. If it helps her and makes her feel better, I’m happy to be that person.”

“You should listen to Erwin,” Farlan tells Levi, biting into another cracker. “He’s willing to accept the blame – and why shouldn’t he?”

“Don’t *you* fucking start,” Levi snaps, his hands clenching into fists. “You know fucking well you wouldn’t be sitting there right now if–”

“And you know just as well that none of us would have to be here right now if *they* hadn’t turned all of Dresden into a fucking inferno,” Farlan hisses back at him, his face near unrecognisable from the anger. “So you can save all that sanctimonious bullshit about how I should be grateful to have kept my life when the truth is if it weren’t for him and his people, I wouldn’t have had to run for my life in the first place.”

Without saying anything further Farlan jumps up from the table and returns to the sitting room, handing Isabel’s crackers and jam to her before sitting down. Levi looks after him, feeling an ache in his chest when he turns back to Erwin and sees the pained expression on his face.

“It’s fine,” the man tries to convince him anyway, to little avail. “I understand why they’re upset. It’s difficult to separate a person from their background. Just like you could never forget all your neighbours cheered at the parades and voted for—”

“I told you,” Levi interrupts him in a whisper. “Don’t compare yourself to them.”

Erwin falls quiet and reaches over to brush his hand over Levi’s; the warmth of it reminds him of the previous night and of how quickly Erwin’s pleasure turned to nothing. He wonders if this is why, if the guilt of what his countrymen have done weighs on Erwin’s shoulders too, whether that’s why he wants to take on all this blame, because he feels as though he deserves it. Levi meets the man’s eyes briefly and tries to look for any sign of that, but all he finds is an expression meant to calm *him*, as if Erwin himself doesn’t need any kind words – or perhaps doesn’t deserve them.

He’s relieved when Erwin tells him there’s much they need to do, things that raise less suspicion if done during the daylight hours. They start by nailing the heavy pieces of fabric onto the frames of the windows to keep any light from shining out when they light the fires at night. They spend hours taking turns chopping up wood to fill the shed by the privy, nearly getting into an argument when Erwin forces Levi to take a moment to rest his leg. They knock down parts of the fence running around the cottage to make it look abandoned should anyone happen across it. By the time they finish, Levi’s arms are shaking from the effort and he can’t help smiling at the exhaustion when he finally sits down after washing himself with cold water from the well.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” Erwin notes as he takes a seat at the kitchen table.

Levi nods and sighs contentedly. “I wouldn’t go so far as to say I’m glad for how things turned out,” he says, remembering the smell of smoke and the hot wind on his face from the burning city, “but at least here I can go outside and stretch my legs.”

“You did always say it would be difficult for you,” Erwin whispers, and Levi scoffs.

“It was a fucking nightmare,” Levi admits, nearly mentioning what a relief it was to have Marie visit, but thinking better of it at the last second and saying instead, “but all of that’s in the past now.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees quietly. “I wonder if you’ll come to resent the outdoors, should we ever be able to leave this place.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” Levi tells him, making him laugh. There’s so much more he’d like to say, about how everything seems better now that Erwin’s back, how he has hope, how he feels alive and safe and free but just like before, he has no words for it, so he spends an hour and the last of the warm water in the heater scrubbing Erwin’s uniform clean, knowing the man has little else to change into.

Levi lets Isabel have her dinner in the sitting room with Farlan, lets her avoid Erwin if that’s what she’s decided to do, but after the world behind the windows has grown dark and the fires have been lit to keep the cottage warm, he stops her from escaping the room when Erwin sits down in an armchair by the hearth.

“We’re all in this together whether you like it or not,” Levi tells her as she crosses her arms over her chest and stares at the floor, “and if we’re going to make it through this we’re going to have to work together as well.”

Isabel doesn’t speak but doesn’t look up either. Levi leaves her to her sulking and walks over to the bookshelf to rip a page out of one of them – he can hear Farlan gasping loudly behind him before he walks back to the fireplace.

“We need to take stock of everything we have,” he tells the others, already busily writing down words on the piece of paper, “so you two need to go through the things you took with you.”

They start digging through the duffel bag and the suitcase, making piles of different types of clothes while Levi and Erwin carry the food into the sitting room and start weighing everything out, the dried peas, the flour, the jam, the tinned fruit. Some dishes have ended up in the sack as well, those white porcelain cups that Levi thought were so impersonal when he first saw them but which now make him think of a hundred things and a hundred moments with Erwin, of them having their tea and talking, of that time when Nile visited, of that quiet Sunday they spent wrapped in each other’s arms. Erwin managed to pack up all the food they had in the apartment and much of it Levi writes down from memory, from the countless times he weighed and re-weighed everything.

On the other side of the page he makes a list of their clothes, of all the woolly sweaters and socks of which they have several, and of the scarves and hats and gloves which will be enough to keep Farlan and Isabel warm. At the end of the day it’s Erwin they need to worry about the most – other than his uniform and the sweater and trousers he’s found in some cupboard here, the man has nothing but his boots and his long overcoat, not even a spare pair of underwear, and it’s not as if he’ll be able to borrow from Levi or Farlan even with all the weight he’s lost.

“Is that all we have then?” Levi finally asks Farlan and Isabel who both nod quietly.

“That,” Isabel mutters, “and my U-Boats.”

“How many of those do you have?” Levi asks her, writing down ‘47 U-Boats’ neatly at the bottom of the page.

“We might as well burn them,” Isabel tells him in a half-whisper that makes Levi shiver.

“You’ve had them for a long time,” he tries to remind her. “Would be a shame for you to lose them.”

“Why?” she asks him sullenly. “Everything else has burned already. Why should I keep something like that? It’s just a pile of paper.”

“I’ve kept my letters,” Farlan says, joining the conversation. “They’re just a pile of paper too, but I’m not going to burn them.”

“But you wrote them to Christofer,” Isabel counters. “It’s not as if I’m in love with a U-Boat. It was just something to pass the time. It just reminded me of someone but he’s dead now so why should I bother?”

Farlan falls quiet for a moment before saying, “You know, Christofer’s probably dead by now too. It doesn’t mean I don’t want to keep remembering him.”

Levi watches Isabel as she stares wordlessly at the flames, her knees hugged tightly against her chest. In the end she merely shrugs but leaves the U-Boats where they are nonetheless.

“We won’t have any problem keeping warm while we’re staying here,” Erwin tells Levi once they’ve curled up in bed, trying to stay awake; they all need to learn to live during night-time sooner rather than later. “We’ve got enough firewood to last us a while, and after that we can always gather things from the woods. We even have the orchard – and the books, should it come to that.”

Levi agrees in a quiet grunt, leaning his chin against Erwin’s chest and locking his leg under his thigh. The man feels warm enough to keep Levi from feeling the cold even without the fire crackling merrily in the tiled oven. There’s something so tangible about Erwin’s body underneath him, something so solid and familiar that Levi feels as though his heart is beating more slowly and steadily now, as if it was nothing but the pain of being apart that made its work so wearisome before. It’s strange for Levi to find himself again like this, with no knowing how long they have to spend together, no days left to count, no goodbyes in sight – and even if they’re discovered, they’ll go together, which Levi thinks is better than to be left wondering.

“You haven’t told me what you think,” Erwin suddenly says, something cautious in his tone, “about Dresden.”

Levi turns to look at the man, his brows knitting over his eyes. “What of it?” he asks, moving one of his arms under his chin.

“It was your home for–”

“It wasn’t,” Levi corrects him at once, preferring the confusion on the man’s face to him thinking Levi would resent him for anything. “It was just where I lived, and now I don’t. That’s all.”

“You don’t need to spare my feelings, Le—”

“I’m not,” Levi interrupts again, not sure himself whether he’s telling the truth. “I knew when I got those false papers that I’d be running from place to place. I made my peace with that thought a long time ago.”

Erwin studies his face for a moment before sighing and turning to look at the ceiling, his thick brows drawn to a frown. “There were people there,” he finally says after a long pause. “People you cared about. People who were kind to you.”

“Most of whom would still rather have seen me executed if they’d known what I am,” Levi insists. “You think Frau Gernhardt would’ve sworn to protect us if she’d known a bunch of foreign spies were carrying the corpse of a German officer past her door, and one killed by a Jew no less?”

“Forgive me,” Erwin says after taking another moment; there’s something distant in his tone. “I forgot it’s not in your nature to form attachments.”

Levi thinks of the words and feels a sting of pain for them. Is this with Erwin not an attachment? Are what he has with Farlan and Isabel not like the ties other people have to family? It’s not as if Levi chose to lose everyone before, it’s not as if he was born wary of losing them.

“I do form attachments,” he corrects Erwin, muttering the words onto his chest without being able to look him in the eye even when he feels the man turning to look at him. “Usually I’m just slow and careful about them. You know I had no problem with—”

The words are out of his mouth before he can stop himself, and they both know which name he’s been about to say next. Levi can feel Erwin’s body tensing and the silence between them grows heavy with that which they leave unspoken: *Marie*. Finally, Erwin whispers another apology against Levi’s hair along with a kiss, pushing both of them past the moment and changing the subject.

“I’m worried about Isabel,” Erwin says, folding his arm under his head and sighing. “It seems to me like she has nowhere left in her mind to hide from what has happened to her.”

“She’s always been aware of it, even if she won’t talk about it,” Levi tells him. “It breaks through sometimes.”

“She needs someone to talk to.”

“She used to talk to Nanaba,” Levi says. “I’m sure she told her things she’s never told Farlan and me. I wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for her to start opening up to any of us now.”

Erwin sighs again. “You’re probably right about that,” he agrees tiredly. “I’m afraid she’ll run away if we don’t do something.”

“She’s reckless sometimes, but she’s not stupid,” Levi reminds the man. “She knows what it’s like out there better than any of us. She knows how good her chances are alone in the wild, and she’ll stay right here – at least until the weather gets warmer.”

“I hope you’re right about that too,” Erwin says with a flash of a smile. “I’m really quite fond of her – and Farlan.”

Levi struggles to suppress a scoff, turning it into a smile at the last second. “They both like you as well. They’re just too stupid to see it.”

“You shouldn’t say that,” Erwin scolds him gently. “They’re hardly stupid if they see me as an enemy right now.”

“Yes, they are,” Levi insists, feeling his anger flaring again in his chest. “All you’ve ever done is make sure they’ll be safe. It’s all you’ve done now. If they don’t understand that then they’re more stupid than I am.”

“You shouldn’t call yourself stupid either, Levi,” Erwin tells him softly, laying his hand on his head.

Levi scoffs. “You know, I tried to read a book when you were away. Didn’t get past the second page.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re stupid,” Erwin says, pushing his fingers into Levi’s hair. “All it means is that so far in your life you haven’t learned to be very good at reading.”

“I don’t know,” Levi says and stops to yawn, laying his ear against Erwin’s chest. “The letters just jump around the page whenever I try to focus on them.”

“Not everyone needs to be the reading type,” Erwin whispers and yawns as well. “Maybe numbers are more your strength.”

Levi agrees in a grunt, pulling Erwin’s hand back on top of his head when he’s about to move it. There’s a blissful heaviness in his limbs, all the signs of a hard day’s work he’s yearned for even when he’s been helping Erwin, cleaning his apartment and joining him on missions. It reminds him of his youth when he spent much of his time carrying crates of goods into the shop and sacks of coal up the stairs into the apartment above. Kenny left the heavy lifting to him, saying it was bad for his back. For all Levi knows he might have lied about that, but he never really minded the exertion and seldom complained.

“You’ve lost weight,” Levi thinks to mutter, feeling Erwin’s ribs pressed against the side of his face.

“Rations at the front,” Erwin offers as an explanation, moving under Levi to get more comfortable. “And I’m afraid the food didn’t exactly agree with me either.”

“We should get you some fish or something,” Levi mutters, closing his eyes. “Maybe a duck. We could catch it with one of the nets in the shed. You need something with fat in it.”

“I’m fine, Levi,” Erwin assures him. “It’s not as if you three aren’t looking thinner than you were before.”

Levi grunts again, pressing a quick kiss on Erwin’s chest when he turns his head and curls up against the warmth of the other man’s body.

“You feel different,” he mumbles, fingers tracing the bones he can feel under Erwin’s skin, his shoulders, his hands, his hips.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin whispers, but Levi shakes his head.

“I just need to get used to it, that’s all,” he murmurs, the tips of his fingers brushing against the coarse blond hair under Erwin’s navel, travelling downward but stopping when he remembers the previous night, the way Erwin grew soft under his touch.

“You know it wasn’t because of you. I just—”

“I know,” Levi interrupts the man’s whisper, wondering how Erwin can always tell what he’s thinking.

Without saying anything further, Levi lets his body grow heavy on Erwin’s, drawing in deep breaths of the scent of his sweat; the missing lavender only bothers him for a second. The silence seems to be waiting for something, for someone to break it and though Levi wants to, the ways to guide Erwin there don’t seem forthcoming. He casts a hesitant glance at the man’s face, frowning at the severity of his expression but knowing neither of them will get any peace if it’s not out in the open; that night in the Gestapo cell taught him at least that. Still the words get stuck in Levi’s throat the first time he tries to speak them.

“What happened at the front, Erwin?”

“Levi—”

“It might be good to get it out,” Levi tries clumsily to convince the man.

Erwin falls quiet for a long moment before muttering, “I’m not sure I want you to know.”

Levi casts another glance at the man, wishing he could force the last remnants of that harshness out of him, the last lingering hints of Holtz. “You don’t have to,” he still whispers, knowing he could never force Erwin. “I just thought... It helped me before. Maybe it would help you.”

Erwin falls quiet again, an expression on his face that twists Levi’s insides and makes him want to swear. The feelings that have stayed at bay until now suddenly begin to seep through whatever walls Levi has raised in his mind. A memory of the day they parted rips through Levi and it seems unnatural now that the danger Erwin was putting himself in wasn’t the only thing he was thinking about then.

“You’re right. It haunts me,” Erwin finally whispers, staring at the ceiling like he’s avoiding Levi’s gaze. “The front and Dresden, it... The thoughts just won’t let me be.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Levi says at once, hastily and desperately. “It wasn’t you on those planes. You had nothing to do with it.”

“I know,” the man says and sighs, rubbing at his eyes with his free hand. “As far as what happened to Dresden goes, it’s not logical for me to feel guilty or to accept blame.”

They fall quiet again and Levi can’t bring himself to ask what else there is for Erwin to feel guilty about.

“My father did his best to impart to me the importance of a sense of personal responsibility,” Erwin continues suddenly. “I’d like to think I’ve grown up to be a man who doesn’t have a problem admitting when he’s made a mistake, someone who can take responsibility for his actions.”

Levi grunts, hoping it will be enough, hoping Erwin knows himself well enough not to need him to insist on it. He does remember how special that was when they first met, the way Erwin accepted Levi’s word over his own, the way he wasn’t too proud to admit Levi knew more than he did.

“I have no problem feeling responsible – if I did, my promotion to officer would have been without merit. That’s not...”

The pause in Erwin’s words makes Levi glance up again with a frown, and now there’s no question about whether Erwin is avoiding his gaze.

“That’s not what worries me,” he goes on after a short moment; there’s quiet fear in his eyes. “There are things that I’ve done that I am to blame for – there can be no doubting that.”

“What is it then?” Levi asks, keeping his tone quiet and soothing, staying silent until Erwin is ready to speak.

“I’m not sure I want you to know,” Erwin finally starts again in a voice that tells of anguish “because I’m afraid of how you’ll see me once you do.”

The words make Levi frown but just as he’s about to dismiss them, he remembers the previous time Erwin revealed something to him, something he was ashamed of. He’d denied his help to someone who needed it, people whom his decision condemned to an unimaginable fate – and even then Erwin’s crime was simply doing nothing. As Levi glances up again, he wonders how much worse this can be, how much Erwin needs to do for him to be beyond his forgiveness.

“I don’t care what it is you did,” he finally says, realising he’s wasting his time wondering. “We’ve both done terrible things. I’ve killed people, same as you. But it’s like you said, isn’t it? We’re all terrible people if you don’t look at the bigger picture.”

“The bigger picture,” Erwin whispers back and scoffs quietly. “I must admit, while I was out there I spent less time thinking about that than I did thinking about Osterhaus.”

“What were you thinking about that swine for?” Levi asks sharply.

“Just about what he said,” Erwin tells him, sounding sad and tired, “about how he hates hypocrites.”

“How many fucking times do I have to tell you?” Levi huffs, feeling a surge of anger swelling in his chest. “Don’t compare yourself to them. There’s nothing you’ve done that—”

“I spent several weeks at the front interrogating prisoners of war,” Erwin interrupts him, and Levi falls quiet at once. “Most of them were Red Army officers and soldiers, but some were British and American. I was expected to get information out of them using any means necessary.”

Levi keeps quiet even when Erwin finishes speaking, his mind resisting the images of Erwin committing acts of cruelty, of Erwin inflicting pain, of Erwin punching that man who tried to take the car and how he kept hitting him over and over and over even when the man had surrendered. Beyond the pain of imagining Erwin doing something like that, something that fits his character and actions so poorly, Levi feels almost relieved for getting an explanation for the act.

“If you knew what I have done...” Erwin starts again, his words trailing off as he swallows with effort. “I don’t think you’d be able to say that I bear no resemblance to them.”

“It’s not the same,” Levi insists, growing angrier not just from what Erwin has said but also from the hint of frustration in his expression. “It isn’t. You didn’t have a choice. It’s not as if you wanted to—”

“There are plenty of German soldiers who don’t want to fight either,” Erwin interrupts him again. “There are even people in the SS who only carry out orders because they know refusing to will get them killed. How am I any different from them?”

“Because you are,” Levi growls, gritting his teeth as his hands clench into fists. “How many times do I have to say it Erwin? Don’t fucking insult me by suggesting that—”

“How am I insulting you?”

“Do you think I could ever have trusted you for one second if you were anything like them?” Levi snarls. “Do you think I could be doing this with someone who reminded me in any way of *them*?”

“Levi, you have to admit that—”

“No, I don’t,” Levi snaps. “I don’t care what you’ve done. Whatever it is, it doesn’t compare. It doesn’t even come close.”

“I tortured people. My own countrymen,” Erwin hisses, suddenly losing his patience. “I kept them awake until they were delirious. I denied them the little food they were offered in the

first place. I caused them pain just to pass on information to the people I'm supposed to be fighting against. How can you say that I'm not like them, that my reasons were any more justified than theirs? How can you think that what I'm doing is right for anyone?"

"Of course it isn't," Levi counters, feeling his cheeks flushing with anger as he struggles to find any words to express how he feels. "Nothing about this is right. None of us are supposed to do things like this. But there is a difference between you and them."

Erwin shakes his head slowly. "It's getting harder and harder to see what that could be."

Levi lets his anger melt away as he stares at the sadness in Erwin's expression quietly, thinking about all the guilt and the anguish the man is feeling and how if the world were a halfway decent place he wouldn't be feeling any of it. He imagines the people who arrested Kenny, thinks back to the Gestapo men who walked him to the headquarters, thinks of Böhmer and Krieger and Osterhaus; realising Erwin feels himself to be in any way like them makes him sick to his stomach.

"Trust what I see," Levi finally states, feeling the familiar frustration at how clumsy his words of comfort are, strengthening them by guiding Erwin's hand onto his back. "You know I can judge this better than most people."

Erwin turns to look at him, his thick brows drawn to a frown for a moment before he sighs and relaxes, his fingers moving up to caress the stubbly undercut at the back of Levi's head. "I do trust you Levi," he mutters. "It's myself I'm not so sure of."

"I'll trust you enough for the both of us then," Levi tells him, relieved to hear Erwin uttering a quiet laugh.

"Did Marie ever pass on my letter to you?" the man suddenly changes the subject, flashing a quick smile at Levi's nod; it doesn't mask the sadness and concern in his eyes at the mention of her. "I'm glad. I never wanted you to feel uncertain about my fate. Reading Marie's response and hearing you were safe gave me more hope than you can imagine."

"It made me feel better too," Levi tells him, managing to smile at the memory as he leans his cheek against Erwin's chest, hoping that thinking about her doesn't make the man feel as hollow as he himself feels. "Made it easier not to lose my mind there."

"I'm glad you were able to cope with it," Erwin whispers. "And I'm also glad that you've kept yourself in shape."

"Noticed that, did you?"

"Of course I noticed that, Levi," Erwin answers, making Levi chuckle quietly.

"It's good you've got your priorities sorted out," he comments, feeling the rumble of Erwin's laughter against his face before they fall quiet again.

"I wish there was a way to find out what happened to her," Erwin finally whispers.

Levi doesn't say a word, doesn't even move, pierced by the memory of Marie reaching out and taking his hand in hers, assuming he feels for Erwin what she feels for her husband, never questioning it or resenting Levi for it, never suggesting Levi wasn't good enough. He remembers Isabel playing with baby Sofie, making her laugh and calling her 'sweetness'. Levi shudders as he realises only a day has passed since it happened, and suddenly his answer to Erwin's question about Dresden feels like a lie.

"I think it's what Isabel's the most upset about," he whispers back. "Marie and Frau Gernhardt."

"Perhaps it has made her feel as though she's lost her mother all over again," Erwin voices.

"Marie could be fine," Levi says, feeling as though it's important to hear the words out loud. "She doesn't live in the Altstadt. She had no business there so late at night. She was probably asleep when the bombing started. She might even have been at Nile's mother's house. That's even further away, isn't it?"

Erwin agrees in a quiet hum. "I just... wish there was a way to be sure."

"You could ask one of your contacts to send a letter to her address," Levi suggests, "and ask her to send one back."

"Maybe," Erwin muses, yawning, "if we'll ever be able to leave this place."

They stay up for a few more hours talking about other things, but when Erwin finally nods off, Levi's thoughts return at once to Marie and to Isabel. Perhaps what Erwin said is true, that the girl saw Marie as something resembling a mother, or that she felt that way about Frau Gernhardt. Levi pushes past his own anger and knows it makes Isabel's behaviour easier to understand, but when a week later she still refuses to join him, Farlan and Erwin for dinner, all Levi sees is the shadow passing over Erwin's expression.

"That's enough Isabel," he snaps at her after marching into the sitting room. "Get up."

She crosses her arms over her chest and pushes her body further into the backrest of the sofa, staring at the freshly-lit fire in the hearth without saying a word.

"Stop acting like a shitty brat," Levi tells her, raising his voice. "You won't eat here anymore, do you understand?"

"Then I won't eat at all," Isabel whines, yelping loudly when Levi grabs her arm and pulls her to her feet; the sound makes Erwin and Farlan run into the sitting room.

"I'm done putting up with your shit," Levi hisses, only letting go of Isabel when he's dragged her halfway across the room. "I'm done watching you acting like a fucking ungrateful little—"

"Levi, please stop—"

“I’m not being ungrateful!” Isabel shouts; Levi can tell from the way she clenches her fists and blinks away her tears that she’d still rather be angry than sad. “He didn’t stop! He didn’t go back and save them and now they’re all dead! He killed them! He killed Hanna and Bruno and Sofie! He killed Frau Gernhardt! He killed Ma—”

“STOP IT!”

Isabel falls quiet, the sullenness of her expression returning quickly after the initial surprise. Levi’s breathing falls heavily enough to blur his vision as he tries to force himself to calm down. He can see Erwin from the corner of his eye, frozen in the entrance of the room, his posture rigid and his brows furrowed, and even that is enough to make Levi’s blood boil again.

“Are you really stupid enough to think he had any time to do that?!” he asks Isabel, who turns to stare at the floor. “Do you honestly think we could have gone back to look for anyone?!”

“We could have gone back! We could have driven around the—”

“Don’t be such a fucking idiot!” Levi shouts back at her. “We would have gotten pulled into the flames just trying to cross the river! Would that have been better?! If we’d all died in Dresden along with everyone else?!”

Though he can see Isabel blinking furiously, Levi doesn’t stop.

“Do you realise what has happened?!” he asks her, finally understanding what it is about her behaviour that angers him so much. “If it wasn’t for us, Erwin would be on his way out of this mess! He’d be going back to England! It’s only because of us that he’s still in Germany, that he’s still putting himself in danger! Watching you two acting like two of the most ungrateful pieces of shit makes me think he shouldn’t have fucking bothered!”

Isabel lets out a quiet whimper but Levi points his finger at Erwin.

“Look at him!” he tells her, making sure she turns her teary eyes on the man. “If he had done what you wanted, he’d be dead right now. Is that what you want?”

Levi watches Isabel’s bottom lip begin to quiver as the first tears fall onto her cheeks. She wipes them away angrily but as soon as she turns to look at Erwin again, they start to roll down her face. In the end she lets them.

“Of course I don’t want Erwin to die!” she wails, drawing a shaky breath as she sinks into an armchair, buries her face in her hands and mutters, “I don’t want anyone to die. I never wanted anyone to die anymore.”

Levi lets out a deep breath and kneels down in front of her, giving her a moment to cry before putting his hand on her arm. She looks at him, her face red and her eyes swollen.

“I’m sorry I hurt your arm,” Levi whispers, smiling quickly when she nods.

“I’m sorry I’ve been so awful,” she mutters back, chuckling a little at his shrug before getting to her feet and walking up to Erwin. “I’m sorry I said those horrible things. It just felt better to be angry than to be sad.”

“So it does sometimes,” Erwin tells her, his smile wavering almost at once. “And I’m sorry I couldn’t save all your friends. If I’d had more time I—”

“It’s not your fault,” Isabel says, suddenly throwing her arms around his waist and pressing her face against his chest. “I just forgot that everyone dies for a moment.”

Levi watches Erwin lay his hand clumsily on top of her head for a few seconds before she pulls away and turns back to Levi, asking him if she can have her dinner now. When he nods she runs to the kitchen; they all follow more slowly, Farlan lingering by the kitchen door to catch Levi.

“Is it true? Was he going back to England?” he asks, scoffing quietly when Levi nods. “Maybe he should have signalled that to the planes. I’m sure one of them could have given him a ride home.”

Levi glares at Farlan, but doesn’t say a word.

Life seems easier after this, even if they all grow tired of the endless darkness, catching only a few hours of light at dusk and dawn before they fall asleep. Still Levi considers it a minor inconvenience; they have everything they need, enough food to keep them standing and fires to keep them warm. Levi gets quickly into the habit of stepping out into the garden as soon as he wakes up, walking around the cottage and the orchard and the vegetable patch, drawing in large gulps of fresh air that his lungs don’t seem to get enough of even after their second week there. He spends his days sleeping next to Erwin, touching Erwin’s body as tentatively as the man once touched his own, letting his soft caresses guide as much of Erwin back from the front as they can.

Soon they fall again into a routine of idleness that makes Levi test the condition of his leg anxiously during the walks he takes in the woods near the cottage – something he calls scouting, though in truth he’s merely trying to find something to do again. Erwin keeps thinking of things that need doing indoors as well, but Isabel’s guilt for how she treated Erwin means Levi can’t get anywhere near the tasks before she’s volunteered to help. Levi scrubs the whole house clean from top to bottom while Farlan reads book after book about hunting and forestry, both of which subjects seem to interest him very little, if at all. When they’re lying in bed, Levi and Erwin talk about leaving but more half-heartedly after every day that passes, lulled into a sense of security that breaks suddenly one early morning with voices carrying in from the garden out front.

“Into the cellar,” Levi mouths hastily to Farlan and Isabel who sneak quickly and soundlessly into the kitchen and disappear through the hatch on the floor.

Levi tightens his hold around the knife he’s come to keep by the bed, following Erwin to take his place by the door. He hears the quiet clicking sound as Erwin loads the handgun and leans

against the strip of wall between the window and the entrance. Levi presses his ear close to the hinges to listen, starting when someone on the other side tries the handle.

“It’s locked,” a man speaks; there’s a quiet rustle at the window when someone tries to see if it opens from the outside. “Can’t get through here either.”

Another man hisses a swear and spits, and the handle is tested again, more forcefully this time. Levi can feel his breath hitching in his throat and he presses the butt of the knife against his left palm to keep the weapon steadier in his sweaty grasp. He looks over at Erwin whose expression shows nothing but cold determination; even at that moment Levi isn’t sure if he finds it calming or disturbing.

“Could break the window,” a voice suggests as someone throws their weight against the door.

“And how would you keep the cold out then?” a man replies angrily. “Fucking idiot.”

“It has a fireplace, you piece of shit!” the first voice argues. “What the fuck do we need a proper window for if we have that?”

“And the chimney’s probably collapsed. You want us all to die of carbon monoxide poisoning?”

“You don’t know nothing about—”

“What the fuck do you all think you’re doing?” a new voice joins the conversation in an angry whisper; the tone is rough even in those hushed words. “Get away from there! Are you a fucking idiot?!”

“We just thought—”

“What did I fucking tell you? We don’t go near *any* houses, any buildings, anything. They’re the first places Feldgendarmerie will check. I thought even you stupid sons of whores could’ve fucking understood that much,” the man goes on; clearly the leader of the group. “You want to go the same way Knauer did?”

There’s a heavy silence that falls, and for a moment all Levi and Erwin can hear is someone shuffling their feet in the dry grass.

“Can’t we stay here even for one night?” someone finally argues hesitantly. “Who’s going to know? Besides, there might be stuff there, food or—”

“Look at this fucking place!” the leader raises his voice and mutters a few choice swears. “No one’s lived here for a long time, and they certainly haven’t fucking left a buffet of food waiting for you fucking idiots.”

“I don’t know about that, Reitz,” one of the other men says. “The privy smells of fresh shit.”

“Maybe there’s some women hiding in there.”

“It’s your own shit you smell, Hänel,” the leader counters, sounding more annoyed by the second. “You want to raid this place for more stuff to carry around, be my guest. But I’m not slowing down for you.”

There’s a rustling sound of footsteps carrying someone away from the cottage, followed quickly by other ones. On the other side of the door someone tries the handle one more time before swearing and giving up. Levi and Erwin look at each other, staying in their posts for a long time before relaxing.

“Just someone passing through,” Levi tells Isabel and Farlan; it takes him a moment to realise he’s whispering. “They left pretty quickly. I don’t think they’ll be coming back.”

“Were they German?” Farlan asks, accepting a cigarette from Erwin as the man lights one for himself.

“Army deserters,” Erwin explains, something of Holtz seeping into his voice again. “They’re running from the Feldgendarmerie.”

“What’s that?” Isabel asks, sitting down at the table after glancing at the kitchen door.

“Military police,” Erwin says, taking a drag off his cigarette. “They deal with deserters and defeatists at the front, hunt them down if necessary.”

The quiet that falls on the room seems to make the air harder to breathe. Though Levi has things to say and questions to ask, he keeps his silence along with Farlan and Isabel, deciding to find a better time to talk with Erwin. When he finally does, he makes sure both Farlan and Isabel are busy with their own tasks before drawing a seat at the kitchen table and taking a sip from his cup of cold water – they’ve not dared to light the fires tonight.

“What are you thinking?” Levi asks, waiting as Erwin lights another cigarette. “Does this mean trouble?”

Erwin shrugs. “It’s hard to say,” he admits. “I’d think they’re just being overly cautious, but it sounds like one their friends was discovered – and not very long ago either, judging by their reactions.”

“They’re after you too, aren’t they? The Feldgendarmerie.”

Erwin lets out a joyless laugh. “They’re called head hunters,” he explains. “There’s a part of me that’s surprised they haven’t tracked me down here already. Thank God the cottage is in the name of a third party – seems to me like they’ll be looking for Darlett too.”

“My leg’s feeling a lot better,” Levi tells Erwin, “but we’re no closer to getting more supplies. Have you come up with any ideas?”

“Nothing beyond sending Isabel to the town to look for some,” Erwin says, sighing and shaking his head. “Even if she found something, we’ve no money to pay for it, and it’s more than likely someone would recognise her as an outsider and start wondering where she came from.”

“Is there anything we can make from the things we have?” Levi asks now. “We’ve got needles and thread. Couldn’t we make some kind of tent or something?”

“I’m sure we could fashion something out of the things we can find here,” Erwin agrees. “Perhaps not a tent – anything we can put together would be difficult to carry around – but something to keep us warm at night. And we can take as many of the quilts as we can reasonably carry with us.”

“We’ll have to do without weapons,” Levi muses, “but I guess we’d need a fair bit of luck for them to be of any use anyway.”

Erwin grunts. “Should we have a run in with the Feldgendarmerie, a gun or two more would by no means guarantee any kind of advantage.”

“When do you suppose we should leave then?” Levi asks.

“I don’t really see the point in putting it off for much longer,” Erwin says. “Our chances are unlikely to improve while we sit here. We will need to get the supplies ready before we can leave, of course.”

“Before we can *what*?”

They both turn around to see Farlan standing at the door, his brows drawn to a frown that even now looks more angry than confused. Levi swears under his breath.

“Farlan–” he starts, but the man cuts him short.

“Please tell me you’re not serious.” His voice is hollow and the words push out through gritted teeth. “Please tell me you two aren’t actually considering us leaving this place.”

“Our chances of surviving–”

“I wasn’t talking to *you*!” Farlan hisses at Erwin, his words suddenly so poisonous they make Levi shudder. “Can’t you tell when you’re not wanted? Don’t you know you’ve caused enough trouble already?”

“Don’t you fucking talk to Erwin like–”

“And *you*!” Farlan spits, turning back to Levi. “If you try to tell me what to do one more time, Levi, I swear to God I’m going to strangle you in your sleep!”

They stare at each other in silence for a moment. Levi can see the heaviness of Farlan’s breathing in the way his chest rises and falls, can see his anger in everything from the fists his hands form to the tightness of his jaw. Next to Levi Erwin puts out his cigarette, the only thing that breaks the calm.

“I’m not going,” Farlan finally says.

“Farlan–” Levi starts again, but the man shakes his head.

“No,” he insists, his voice low and steady. “I’m done putting my faith in you. I’m done blindly following your orders when all they do is get us into worse trouble than we were already in. I’m done trusting *him* with my life when I wouldn’t trust one of them with so much as my coat at a restaurant.”

“You want to stay?” Levi replies, his anger coming out so serenely it disturbs even him. “You want to take your chances in here by yourself?”

“I’d rather die here than go anywhere with someone who doesn’t blink an eye when an entire city’s worth of innocent people get murdered,” Farlan tells him, his eyes flashing when he glances at Erwin. “How can you even ask me to put my life in the hands of someone like that?”

Levi can feel his rage running as a shiver down his spine, tickling him into a horrible laugh that leaves the room feeling like a slaughterhouse. It makes him sick, makes him force down a surge of nausea before he can turn to Erwin.

“Go outside with Isabel,” he says calmly. “She doesn’t need to hear this.”

“Hear what?” Farlan asks, spreading his arms as Erwin stands up and leaves the room. “There’s nothing to talk about Levi. I’ve said all I have to say.”

“You’ve said all you have to say,” Levi repeats, laughing again as he pushes to his feet and takes a few steps toward Farlan. “Well, that was always what you cared about, wasn’t it? That other people hear what *you* have to say.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by that,” Farlan counters, crossing his arms over his chest; Levi thinks he can see a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. “What? Don’t I have the right to voice my opinions?”

“Don’t *you* have the right?” Levi repeats again; he can hear the door closing in the other room. “So you want to let me know what you think of Erwin? That you think he’s a monster?”

“Why do you suddenly care so much about what I think?” Farlan counters, not answering the question. “It’s not as if you ever did before. It’s not as if it’s mattered to you one bit what I’ve—”

“Did you vote for them, Farlan?” Levi asks now, taking another step toward the man who looks back, surprised.

“You know I didn’t,” he snaps at once. “I told you, when Christofer joined the party I was furious, I wouldn’t—”

“Why?”

The word makes Farlan flinch and take a step back, his heels meeting the wall behind him. He looks at Levi, brows furrowed, as if the question makes no sense.

“I...” Farlan starts, stopping to swallow with effort. “I didn’t support their politics.”

“Which parts of it?”

“Most of it,” Farlan says, but when he sees Levi is about to speak he blurts out, “Any of it. I didn’t agree with any of it.”

“Why did they arrest my uncle, Farlan?” Levi goes on, ignoring the angry glint in the man’s eyes.

“I don’t understand why you’re asking me—”

“Why did they arrest my uncle?” Levi presses, watching that flicker of defiance die as Farlan draws a shallow breath.

“He was Jewish,” Farlan simply says, his fingers catching the sleeve of his cardigan and fiddling with it; it makes him look like a child. “He was trying to— He’s a Jew.”

“Where did they take him?” Levi asks, feeling the weight of his sadness nearly crushing his anger. “After they arrested him, where did they take my uncle?”

“I don’t...” Farlan’s words falter and he clears his throat. “I don’t know where—”

“They took him to a camp,” Levi tells him quietly. “You’ve heard of the camps, haven’t you?”

“Of course I’ve heard of the—”

“Do you know what they’re like?” Levi asks next, suddenly remembering how he made Erwin promise never to tell Farlan and Isabel. “Do you know what happens in those camps? To people like my uncle? To people like me?”

“They’re work camps,” Farlan mutters, turning his gaze on his shoes. “They make you work. It’s hard... It’s hard work at the—”

“No, Farlan,” Levi interrupts him again, feeling once more that dread as vividly as he did the first time Erwin told him. “They don’t send us there to work.”

“Yes,” Farlan insists, talking over Levi. “Yes, they do. Everyone knows that. There are labour camps in the east, that’s where you end up if you break the law, that’s what happens if you don’t join the Jugend, if you don’t join the party.”

“Some people get to work,” Levi admits quietly. “Some people get to die working, but not people like me. Not people like Isabel.”

“No,” Farlan argues again; the denial makes Levi shudder. “No, that’s not true. That wouldn’t make any sense.”

“Does it have to?” Levi asks. “Does anything make sense anymore? Has the war ever made sense?”

Farlan falls quiet, his eyes distant as if he's remembering something, and he shakes his head absently.

When he keeps his silence, Levi continues, "You know who they've sent east, Farlan. Women, children, old people." He pauses, but Farlan still doesn't speak. "Do you really think they've been sent there to work?"

"They've been resettled," the man says, looking up at Levi with a frown. "They've been resettled in the east, in the ghettos, where they can be with their own people."

"The ghettos are empty, Farlan."

"No," he says, raising his voice and shaking his head more fervently. "No, they're not. You don't know that. You haven't seen—"

"They're all dead," Levi whispers. "They've all been murdered. They've all been—"

"NO!" Farlan yells, the anger suddenly back in his voice. He pushes Levi away, biting his teeth together as his eyes fill with tears. "No, it is not true! It's not what we're capable of! It's not what we'll be—"

"Where have they all gone, Farlan?!" Levi shouts back, his voice rough and breaking. "You tell me that! Where are they now?! All those people?!"

"I won't let you do this, I won't let you lie to me, I won't let you say things like—"

"I'll tell you where they've gone!" Levi goes on, wiping at his nose hastily. "It starts with a letter, they send you a letter and they tell you to be somewhere at some time – just like the letter you got only they don't ask you to come to the Gestapo headquarters, they tell you to come to a train station. They load you onto the train, hundreds of people at once, they pack you in so tightly you can't even sit, you can't even breathe."

"It's not true," Farlan mutters, shaking his head. "It's not true, I won't believe it, I won't—"

"Then they take you to the camp," Levi continues, the images flashing in his mind, tearing at his insides. "They order you out of the train, they tell you to stand in a line. One of the lines is the good line, it's the people who get to go to work, who get to starve and break their backs and get sick. That's the line you want to be in."

"No," Farlan keeps mumbling. "No, it doesn't make any sense, it doesn't—"

"Because the other line," Levi starts, stopping to breathe, stopping to get himself together, stopping so he can speak the words. "The other line is where the women go. It's where the elderly go. It's where the children—"

He can sense Farlan turning to look at him when his voice breaks but he doesn't want to look up.

"They tell them they're going to have a shower," Levi continues, staring at a spot on the wall above Farlan's head. "They march them into a room. They shut the door. They let in the

gas—”

“No,” Farlan suddenly speaks up again. “No, no, no, no, it’s not true, it’s not what happens, it’s not what we have done, it’s not what we have done, it can’t be what—”

“It is true, Farlan,” Levi says almost soothingly. “It is true. You know it is.”

“No.”

“They turned us into nothing,” Levi whispers. “This is why they turned us into nothing. Why they had to turn us into nothing. People like me, people like Isabel. People like you and Christofer.”

“No, it wasn’t supposed to be like this, it wasn’t supposed to—”

“Do you know what happens to people like you and me in the camps? To people like Christofer?” Levi asks quietly, like speaking to a child. “They use them for target practice, kill them for a sport. They feed them to their dogs.”

Farlan hugs his arms around himself, still shaking his head, staring ahead of himself like he’s barely heard any of it.

“So if you want to blame Erwin for what the British did to Dresden, go ahead,” Levi tells him. “Just know that I could blame Christofer for this.”

At this Farlan looks up, eyes suddenly full of a rage that takes over all the things that were absent before. He shoves Levi back with surprising force, making him step out to balance himself as he hits the chair behind him.

“How dare you even speak his name?!” Farlan shouts, tears falling from his eyes though he doesn’t seem to notice; he pushes Levi again. “How dare you say he’s got anything to do with that?! How can you say that to me?!”

“Farlan, stop—”

“NO!” Farlan yells, knocking over a chair. “I’m sick of listening to your lies! I’m sick of being forced to trust you when all you ever do is lie to me, all you do is just make up things to try and make us all sound like bad people, to make Christofer sound like—”

“I’m not lying!” Levi shouts back, his hands clenching into fists as his anger rises again. “You fucking think I would lie about something like that?! You think I could make something like that up?! You think I give a shit about how that makes *you* sound, how that makes *you* feel?!”

“Well you must have heard it from Erwin! How can you be sure *he* didn’t—”

“EVERYONE IS DEAD, FARLAN!” Levi roars, his whole body shuddering at this, the first time he’s said it out loud. “My uncle, his family, *everyone*!”

The words fill the small room, bring the walls closer and turn the air to ashes, and Levi can barely breathe.

“So you fucking go ahead and read Mein Kampf and flinch every time someone mentions I’m a Jew and then come and tell me *I’m* trying to make you sound like a bad person!” he says, barely even seeing Farlan though he’s standing right in front of him. “Whatever keeps you from fucking realising how fucking terrible the things you’ve done actually—”

“HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO KNOW?!” Farlan yells back. “How was I supposed to know any of this when you never fucking *tell me anything?!’*”

“I was trying to fucking spare you from hearing—”

“No, you weren’t!” Farlan counters, his face blotchy and red. “You keep saying that but it’s not true! You keep saying that we’re all in this together but we’re not, you’re in this together with Erwin, he’s the only one you give a shit about anymore!”

“Are you honestly fucking telling me that you’ve been like this for all this time because you’re *jealous?!’*” Levi asks, nearly laughing, the sound extinguished at the last second by a sharp sting of guilt. “If it bothered you so much, why did you keep pushing me to be with him?! All I heard for months was ‘you should go to Erwin’ and ‘you should invite Erwin over for dinner’ and ‘you should forgive Erwin, he didn’t mean to smack you across the—”

“Because for once,” Farlan starts, stopping to wipe at his cheeks, “*for once* I wanted it to be *my choice!*”

Levi frowns at the words, struggling to find anything to hold on to, anything that makes sense, but fails. “What are you talking about?” he asks, confused. “What *choice?*”

Farlan stays quiet for a long moment, long enough to make Levi itch in his skin for an explanation.

“It won’t make sense to you but I knew...” the man finally says, his voice breaking. “I knew you’d leave. I just wanted to be the one to decide why.”

“What are you talking about?” Levi asks again. “What do you mean you knew I’d leave? I haven’t gone anywhere!”

“Haven’t you?” Farlan asks him back, hugging his arms around himself again and shaking his head. “You probably don’t realise how much time you’ve spent away, and how when you’re with me and Isabel you’re never *really* with us.”

Whatever words Levi’s anger has been about to make him say, his guilt makes them stick to the roof of his mouth where they stay until he swallows them down; they burn his throat like acid.

“I made my peace with the thought it was because of Erwin,” Farlan continues, scoffing. “And maybe it was in part because I knew nothing would really come of it. So you’re right. I am a terrible person.”

“Farlan—”

“But when I found out it wasn’t because of Erwin, it just...” the man goes on, shaking his head. “You kept secrets and you had plans and they could never have had anything to do with me because I’m so weak and useless and I can’t do anything like that.”

“It wasn’t because you’re—”

“So you see, it just reminded me,” Farlan interrupts Levi, wiping his nose onto the sleeve of his cardigan. “It just reminded me of Christofer. He never told me that he was going to enlist. Did I ever tell you that?” He scoffs, something so bitter in that sound that it makes Levi shudder. “One day he just... told me he’d done it. Like none of the plans we had made had ever mattered. Like I had never mattered.”

They both fall silent for an odd moment of calm, and it feels to Levi like something has broken down from between them.

“And I know, you’re not Christofer,” Farlan says. “I don’t want you to be. I just knew this would happen because it always does. Even my parents threw me out once I was more trouble than I was worth.”

“They wanted to protect you.”

“They wanted to protect themselves,” Farlan counters, sneering. “They sent me to Dresden so they could tell everyone I ran away and to save themselves from having to explain to their neighbours why their queer son was in Buchenwald or Dachau or some such horrible place.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Levi tries, though the words don’t feel right and they make him remember the sour looks Kenny used to give him when he got back home on Sunday mornings. “I’m sure your parents love you, Farlan.”

“It was never the same after Christofer came along,” Farlan says, staring at the floor for a moment before shrugging. “So you see, I didn’t want to prolong the inevitable. I didn’t want to hold on to someone when I knew how it would end.”

Levi looks for something to say, but all his mind is filled with are Isabel’s words about how Farlan feels as though no one loves him, how he pushes people away so it would make sense.

“You’re right though,” Farlan suddenly breaks the silence, uttering a laugh. “I am a terrible person.”

“Farlan—”

“No, I am,” the man insists, turning to look at Levi with enough guilt in his expression to rival Levi’s own, or even Erwin’s. “I don’t like to be reminded of what you are. Whenever I remember I can’t help thinking it’s why you keep so many secrets and why you’re so dishonest.”

Levi watches as Farlan shakes his head and wipes his nose onto his sleeve again.

“I know it’s not true,” Farlan says, his gaze unwavering as he locks it with Levi’s. “I know it doesn’t make you a worse person. I know it doesn’t matter if someone’s Jewish. And still I can’t help the feeling I get.”

“I get it too,” Levi admits, turning his eyes on the floor to avoid seeing the look of confused surprise on Farlan’s face. “I never wanted to be a part of that. Hell, I started pretending I wasn’t as soon as I could. Even now I don’t like looking at myself because of it.”

“I never knew that,” Farlan whispers, and Levi shrugs.

“I guess we don’t talk about these things,” he says, exhaling heavily. “There’s probably a good reason for it.”

Farlan agrees quietly before saying, “Do you remember how it was before? When you hadn’t met Erwin yet?”

“Less and less,” Levi admits; the months and years before that day in April have started to blur together. “What of it?”

“How you used to come home and I’d be cooking and you’d wrap your arms around me and nuzzle against my neck?” Farlan asks, laughing as Levi smiles; it’s not a bad memory. “Can that really have happened?”

“I guess it must have,” Levi says, remembering how Farlan used to smell of soap, just like Erwin does, but still so different. “Do you remember when Isabel came to live with us? How she’d crawl between us in the bed before we bought one for her?”

Farlan laughs again, louder this time. “Oh God, the way she kept kicking me!” he exclaims. “I don’t think I slept more than a few hours a night for weeks!”

Levi chuckles as well, counting a few seconds of the silence before looking up at Farlan. In the end it’s written so plainly on both of their faces that they don’t need to say it.

“Do we have to leave?” Farlan asks, his expression growing more serious when Levi nods.

“Try not to blame Erwin,” he says. “I know it’s difficult but he’s a good person, and he doesn’t deserve to feel so guilty.”

Farlan nods. “I’ll do my best,” he promises, answering Levi’s smile with the same. “You know I’m grateful, don’t you?”

Levi nods again. “What about you?” he asks. “Do you believe that I’m grateful to you? That anyone could be?”

Farlan shrugs and laughs quietly. “I’m starting to,” he admits.

“I’d probably be dead if it wasn’t for you,” Levi tells him, “and I really mean that.”

“I’m glad you found me then,” Farlan replies and for the first time in months his smile looks warm and genuine. “And – despite everything – I’m glad you found Erwin.”

Levi smiles back at him and takes another deep breath before walking out the door, finding Erwin and Isabel going over the strange assortment of things stored up in the shed.

“Did you and Farlan fight?” Isabel asks Levi and he nods.

“It’s alright,” he assures her calmly. “There were just some things we needed to say.”

“Finally,” Isabel huffs, wiping her hands on her trousers. “You two have been stupid about all that for too long if you ask me.”

Levi lets out a laugh and follows her inside, feeling a shiver of pleasure when Erwin’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder, warm and heavy and grounding.

“Are you alright?” the man asks him and Levi nods again, brushing his fingers against Erwin’s before stepping back into the kitchen.

They all spend the evening in the sitting room, huddled under blankets with their faces turned toward the heat still coming off the stones of the fireplace. Erwin explains the plan to Farlan and Isabel; as Levi suspected, as soon as she hears the partisan camp is where Nanaba came from, she has no reservations about leaving. Though Farlan’s hesitation shows clearly on his face, he says nothing against the plan, not even when Erwin mentions the risks and difficulties involved.

“I can help sew something together,” he offers when he hears about their lack of supplies. “I’m sure the two of us can come up with something.”

“Another very useful skill,” Erwin compliments the man, suddenly bringing their previous stay at the cottage to Levi’s mind. “Not that I’m surprised.”

Farlan proves himself to be in possession of more useful skills than even Levi would have thought when Erwin begins preparing them all for the journey a few days later. He starts by going over the use of the handgun, pressing that it’s to be used only for emergencies since they have no spare ammunition to speak of. He shows them how to load and unload it as well as the best stances for aiming – all of them things Farlan barely needs guidance in.

“We didn’t use handguns much in the Jugend,” he explains as he hands the weapon back to Erwin, “but we went over the basics, of course.”

“I hope you won’t have use for that knowledge,” Erwin says, “but it makes me feel easier nonetheless knowing there’s another set of skilled hands in the group.”

Farlan merely shrugs, but Levi catches a hint of a smile on his face when he turns away from Erwin.

“I don’t like guns,” Isabel whispers, fiddling with the neckline of her shirt. “I don’t want to learn that.”

“Nanaba uses a knife,” Levi remembers. “Do you want to learn that?”

Even this doesn't make Isabel's nods anything you'd call enthusiastic, but she lets Levi teach her everything Kenny taught him back when the Brownshirts started making more and more trouble in their neighbourhood; he lets Erwin step in to correct him where he's wrong. She learns it all fast enough, but Levi can't say whether that makes him feel more or less uneasy. Farlan follows his instructions from the sofa, politely refusing to participate.

"I reckon I know enough about how to handle a knife," he says, moving his feet off the seat to let Isabel sit down next to him. "Besides, if I'd ever need to use it on someone I'd probably just panic and try and hit them wherever I can reach."

"Keeping a level head is the most difficult and the most important thing in any fight," Erwin says, rolling up his sleeves. "Judging your opponent correctly in the beginning can mean the difference between winning and losing. Say, if I were to fight Levi," he muses, turning to Levi with a benevolent smile, "I would start by making all my assumptions based on him being a skilled fighter to avoid any nasty surprises later on. Then I would assess his strengths, all the things he can use against me in a fight: his speed, the accuracy of his strikes, the element of surprise—"

"What's the element of surprise?" Levi asks out of genuine curiosity, making Erwin laugh and scratch the back of his head sheepishly.

"In your case I'd say how strong you are despite your size," he explains with a smile. "It took me by surprise before."

"You beat me in ten seconds," Levi reminds Erwin dryly, and he laughs again.

"Well, I did have the advantage."

"I had the knife," Levi counters. "How was that not the advantage?"

"Because I judged you more accurately than you had judged yourself," Erwin tells him. "But you know better now, so we should be more evenly matched."

"What? You want to fight me?" Levi asks, smirking at the half-hearted shrug Erwin gives him.

"I don't think a little demonstration would go amiss," he muses, adjusting his shirt sleeves as Levi assumes the position.

It turns out Erwin was right; now that Levi has learned his strengths, has learned how to stay steady dodging moves that make Erwin struggle to keep his balance, the fight lasts much longer than the first time. They don't hurt each other badly; it's more pushing and pulling, soft kicks and punches meant to earn them points rather than to debilitate. It's only after a fierce struggle that Erwin manages to grab a hold of Levi's arm and twist it behind his back like last time; Levi has a moment to reflect on how different the weight of Erwin's body feels on his now, how all the threat of it has disappeared and been replaced with anticipation and excitement.

“You have to ask yourself though,” Farlan says once they’ve scrambled to their feet, “how useful any of that will be if the other person has a gun.”

“That’s what Levi said,” Erwin admits, “more or less.”

“Still, it’s not nothing,” Levi voices, wiping a touch of sweat off his upper lip. “Came in handy a couple of times.”

“You’re not saying I should give it a go?” Farlan asks, making Levi glance back at Erwin.

“You could try it with Levi, if you’d like,” the man muses. “Who knows? You might both learn something from it.”

Levi takes a few deep breaths as Farlan gets to his feet and faces him, something akin to amusement in his expression beyond the show of disinterest. They both take a step closer, and for a second Levi reconsiders how good an idea this can be with Farlan having no skills to use against him; he doesn’t want Farlan to think he’s taking any of the things they talked about before out on him.

Levi’s fears turn out to be unfounded; as soon as Farlan has managed to grab a good hold of his arm, he throws him over his back and onto the floor with speed and strength that Levi could never have seen coming. The impact knocks the air out of his lungs and he lets Farlan help him up, rubbing at the muscles on his back that are already growing sore.

“What did you think we did in the Jugend? Sat around holding hands?” Farlan asks him with a quiet chuckle.

Levi glares at him in passing as he walks over to Erwin.

“You alright?” the man asks, a note of amusement in his tone that makes Levi repeat the dirty look he gave Farlan.

“Fantastic,” he mutters sourly. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten whose brilliant idea this was.”

“You should have read your opponent better,” Erwin reminds him cheerfully. “You can’t blame me for that.”

“Don’t feel too bad, Levi,” Farlan tells him, only mocking him a little. “I did a fair bit of that with Christofer before we started... Well, you know.”

The words make Isabel let out a groan that turns into a yawn. “I think it’d be better to train all of you in how to shut your mouths,” she lets them know sullenly. “I don’t want to die because you couldn’t shut up about all that nasty stuff you did with Christofer.”

Farlan lets out a deep, exaggerated sigh. “Fine, I’ll keep quiet about Christofer,” he says, “but you need to start watching your snoring then too.”

Isabel rolls her eyes and lets out a rumbling snort. “How can I watch it when I’m asleep?” she argues, making Farlan sigh again. “If you talked about Christofer in your sleep, I wouldn’t complain about it.”

“If you don’t want to die because I can’t shut up about Christofer, *I* don’t want to die because someone heard your snoring,” Farlan tells the girl who resigns, clicking her tongue.

They stay at the cottage long enough to make their final preparations. Erwin and Farlan spend several days fashioning a makeshift tent out of quilts and string and a few short sticks. In the end it looks to Levi more like a glorified duvet cover, the top of which the sticks hold up to form an opening. They finish their work by sewing a few bits and pieces of oilcloth – a good find of Isabel’s, the pieces of cloth used to be a large raincoat she found at the back of the shed – to the bottom end to keep their feet dry should it rain. But the further toward March they get, the more likely it seems to Levi that it will be snow, not rain, that they’ll need to worry about as the weather takes a sudden turn for the worse. Even when the worst of it is over, the nights are still bitter cold, covering the small garden in frost that the sun takes hours to melt entirely.

“You don’t think we should wait until the weather gets warmer again?” Farlan asks Erwin on their last night as they gather around the fireplace; Levi has brewed them the last of their tea and allowed them a slice each off the heavy loaf of bread Farlan has baked a few days earlier.

“Since there’s no knowing how long that might take, I would advise against it,” Erwin tells him, sounding sympathetic. “It may take weeks for the nights to get warmer, and that’s time we don’t have.”

Farlan nods and turns toward the fire like he’s determined to soak up every last bit of its heat before they leave. Isabel presses close to him, clearly to Farlan’s surprise, and stares into the flames for a moment before speaking.

“You can do it, Farlan,” she finally whispers. “It’ll be hard but when you really try, you can do anything.”

Levi watches the bewilderment on Farlan’s face changing quickly into a touched sort of gratitude and he pulls Isabel closer, giving her a kiss on top of her head. She thanks him with a playful shove on his side with her bony elbow, looking pleased when she makes him flinch. They curl up on the sofa soon enough, kicking at each other’s legs before they get comfortable and fall asleep.

When Levi and Erwin settle in for the night, there’s no escaping the stinging realisation that it may well be their last time sharing a bed. Levi tries to keep the thought from his hands, but their touch is still indelicate when they reach for Erwin’s body to pull him close, to hold on to him for as long as he can while they still have shelter. They don’t speak, letting their bodies say what needs to be said of what the moment means, how important it is to be here now, limbs entangled, mouths eager in seeking the other’s breath. The air in the room grows milder from the things they whisper into messes of hair, half-promises from which they free each other as soon as the words are uttered. Everything they do is purposeful and slow, as if they’re both determined to stretch out the night as far as they can. And still, morning comes too soon.

They set out at first light, all dressed as warmly as they can in sweaters and three pairs of socks, with Isabel and Farlan wearing gloves and scarves. The array of things they're carrying on their backs is even more mismatched than their clothing: Farlan with the makeshift tent, folds of fabric flapping about his shoulders, Erwin with the suitcase onto which they've sewn straps of leather so he can carry it around on his back, Isabel with the duffel bag and Levi himself with a jerry can full of clean water, also refitted with straps and string to be carried around more easily. He shifts its weight restlessly from shoulder to shoulder as Erwin peers down at a map before turning back to them with a flash of a smile; a stark contrast to the uniform coat he's wearing.

"We'll need to drink sparingly," he reminds them all. "We'll be moving away from the Elbe, and it will take us a while to get to another river. If we run out in the meantime, we'll need to find water elsewhere, and that'll take us time. So try to drink as little as you possibly can."

They all nod and follow him when he finally starts walking. As he's about to pass the woodshed, Levi turns back for one last look at the cottage, reminding himself one more time how it looked the first time all those months ago, so small and comfortable in the sea of green around it. He remembers Isabel running through the garden, her toe catching a splinter when she dashed up the stairs; the heat of the summer as they cycled to the river; the way Farlan and Isabel laughed at the little fish that came to swim by their feet; how beautiful and strong Erwin looked as he walked out of the water. Now it feels strange that he should have known such happiness, that he and Erwin would have once, if even for a few fleeting days, shared this place as if it were a house of their own, as if their lives could be so intertwined. He turns back to the path in front of him, glancing at Erwin and taking a deep breath, catching the smell of cigarettes when Farlan lights one. Their eyes meet and they nod at each other, bending their heads in the next second to watch their step on the bumpy ground.

They walk for hours without talking, only stopping to rest long enough to eat a little something before continuing on their way. As morning grows into day, the weather starts to get warmer and soon they're all abandoning their heavy winter clothes one item at a time, throwing them onto their backs and rolling up their sleeves. Their sweat doesn't cool until evening when they finally stop to make camp, shivering and exhausted.

"We should get a fire going," Erwin tells them quietly. "It feels as though it might drop below zero tonight."

He passes Farlan the handgun and sends them out to gather old fallen branches and twigs, using a small shovel he's brought along to dig a shallow hole in the ground. Soon they're all sitting around the fire, stretching out their hands toward it to get warmer, pulling on the sweaters they took off earlier to keep the cold at bay.

"We need to set up a guard," Erwin says; the only words that have been uttered since he last spoke. "We'll rest for six hours, which means three people should keep guard for two hours each. We'll take turns being off duty."

"Isabel should get to rest first," Farlan suggests as Isabel's mouth splits to a wide yawn. "I can take first watch tonight."

Erwin nods, taking his watch off his wrist and handing it to Farlan. "I'll take the last one, which leaves the second one to Levi."

Levi nods as well, his eyes still shifting to Farlan huddled by the fire when he crawls into their strange little tent, pushing Isabel next to Erwin as he lies down.

"You're so warm," she mutters sleepily before dozing off, making Erwin chuckle quietly.

Levi sleeps restlessly, the cold ground keeping him shivering well into Farlan's shift and when the man comes to wake him, Levi feels as though he's barely slept at all. It's only when he crawls out of the tent that he realises how warm it has actually grown and when he sits down by the glowing embers, he wraps his quilt around himself as tightly as possible. He throws enough wood into the fire to keep it going, listening to the night that spreads around him, dark and uninviting. The hours go by slowly. They leave too much room for thinking, and though he tries to resist the urge to, Levi pulls the photograph out of his pocket, squinting his eyes to see the faces in the dim light. There's nothing new he remembers now but he keeps staring just to keep himself from glancing at the clock every two minutes.

When he finally goes to wake Erwin, he finds the man sleeping in the middle of the tent with Isabel's head resting against one arm and Farlan's against the other. They've both curled up as close to him as they've been able to and as Levi looks down at them, he wishes he didn't have to disturb them. Erwin's eyes open as soon as Levi steps forward, however, and he takes the watch and the handgun without saying a word, merely brushing his knuckles against Levi's cheek in passing. He looks after the man for a few seconds, savouring that fleeting moment of warmth on his face before locking Isabel between himself and Farlan, wrapping his arm around her small body, sleeping soundly until Erwin wakes them all some hours before dawn. They eat a modest breakfast and break up their camp before gathering up all their supplies again, resuming their long march at first light.

It doesn't take long for the days to start blending into each other. The cold and the hunger grow into rivals in the way they demand their attention, both eventually defeated by the exhaustion that seems to add weight to the things they carry and to make the ground trip them as they walk. When the jerry can on Levi's back becomes troublingly light, he gives it to Isabel and swings the duffel bag on his shoulder instead. As their supply of water dwindles and as the constant cold wears down Farlan's strength, Erwin soon accepts the burden of the tent in addition to the suitcase he's already carrying. Levi thinks it all seems to affect him less than it does the rest of them, perhaps because it's something he already grew used to at the front, but he still catches the man leaning heavily onto his knees whenever he stops to peer down at the map, their only guide to where they're going even if it doesn't tell how close to it they've gotten.

They zigzag in the country, climbing up and down hills and avoiding even the smallest towns, only once or twice sneaking onto the streets in the dead of night to see where they've come and, for whatever reason, to have Erwin peer at the timetables on the small railway stations. They lie still for hours, bodies pressed flat on the bottoms of ditches as they wait for the cover of darkness to cross railways lines or to fill the jerry can from a river or a little stream. The first time they don't boil the water and it gives them all the shits, teaching them a hard

lesson in the way it slows them down even further. The stench clings to them too, giving company to the reek of sweat and their breaths which turn sour from how little they eat and drink. At night Levi dreams of steaming hot baths, waking up with his skin crawling when the reality punches him in the gut yet again.

Isabel's time of the month comes on suddenly, leaving her lying in the tent one morning, clutching her stomach and whimpering. They decide to rest for the day to let her recover, but when the following morning she shows no sign of feeling better, Erwin hoists her onto his back while Farlan and Levi pick up the rest of their things. Levi can see her closing her fist around Erwin's coat and grit her teeth against the pain when Erwin starts to take long, heavy strides that make him grow breathless so quickly it surprises Levi. He splits the guard duty with Farlan that night so Erwin and Isabel can both get as much rest as they can, but the man still needs to hold on to her more tightly the following day when she threatens to fall asleep on his arms. They spend a fair bit of their precious water supply to boil the rags she wears to catch the blood – to keep her from getting an infection, Erwin says, and Levi's glad someone's thought of it, not to make her more uncomfortable than she already is.

She's back to her old self in a few more days, or at least back to whatever twisted version of themselves they've all become out here. Levi can no longer remember a time when the cloying sweet taste of apple jam didn't make him nearly vomit, and he can barely believe that Erwin would have once smelled of lavender soap and not weeks' old sweat and shit. None of them ever talk unless they have to, exchanging only the most urgent words, like the silence is the true leader of their group and not Erwin. They follow him like a band of ghosts, dragging their feet on the dead leaves that litter the ground, clinging to the hope that he at least knows where they're going. Levi catches Farlan looking at Erwin intently whenever the man starts going over his maps, marking down things with a stubby little pencil, and in those moments Levi can't keep himself from wondering how Erwin can be sure where the partisan camp is; to Levi it doesn't seem to be the kind of thing you keep in one place for long, and how they're supposed to reach a moving target he cannot understand.

After days upon days that feel like months of this quiet wandering they finally hear it, a sound that wakes them all with a start early one morning: a series of gunshots in the distance, and the rumbling whisper of explosions. They all huddle together, lost for words until Erwin speaks up.

"From now on we'll need to be more careful," he mutters, and they all nod sombrely. "Keep your guard up at all times. The frontlines are getting close."

From there on their nervousness is obvious in everything they do, from how carefully they place their steps to how they all keep glancing around themselves, expecting to see grey shadows in the distance when they're crossing open areas. The sound of the machineguns echoes in the forest they dive into as they leave the hills and open plains behind, still far but at times drawing closer.

"We'll do double watches from now on," Erwin tells them when they ready their camp that night. "No fire. We'll need to manage without one from now on."

They follow his orders without complaining and Farlan comes to Levi to let him know he's taking the first shift with Isabel.

“You should go and sleep with Erwin,” he whispers. “No doubt things will be hectic once we get to the camp. You might not get another chance in a while.”

Levi nods. “Are you alright?” he asks Farlan as the man’s about to take his place in the watch.

Farlan looks at him without speaking for a moment and flinches at the sound of the gunshots before shaking his head; Levi can hear the metallic clicks when he loads the handgun and sits down at the edge of the camp.

Even next to Erwin, Levi sleeps badly, the erratic tapping of the shots in the distance keeping him awake and invading his dreams, making a nightmare of the steady sound of Erwin’s typewriter; something from another life, it now seems. The faraway fighting sets all their teeth on edge and burdens them with a caution that weighs more heavily on their backs than anything they’re still dragging around. At night Levi can hear Farlan lying awake beside him, struggling to keep his nerves under control as he wakes up, gasping for breath and shuddering like he used to do in their bed after what happened to the Ehrmanns and the people they were hiding. Levi sees how little he eats, like every spoonful takes a year out of his life.

“You need to keep up your strength,” Levi reminds him every morning and Farlan nods, still giving most of the little food he has to Isabel, often retching out whatever he has managed to get down before noon.

He starts to slow them down. Levi can feel it in how easily he breathes, how little effort goes into taking the next step and something about it makes him bristle with anger. He’s caught Erwin passing between the trees like he’s looking for something, a sign carved into the bark, a signal that the camp is close, and the relief he’s seen on the man’s face has fed his hope that soon they’ll be able to wash their bodies and clothes, have a good night’s rest, maybe even something to eat that hasn’t got so much as a whiff of apples on it. They run out of water again, a problem that’s grown more dire now that the weather has grown warmer. When Farlan finally falls behind, collapsing onto the forest floor, Levi is the first to march over to him.

“Get up,” he tells the man, pulling on his sleeve when he merely stares ahead of himself, eyes vacant and teary. “I said get up. We need to keep moving.”

“I can’t,” Farlan whispers, his voice breaking.

“Yes, you can,” Levi insist, giving Farlan’s sleeve another firm tug. “Come on. You’ve made it this far, you can go a bit longer.”

“I can’t,” Farlan repeats, leaning his elbows onto his knees. “You should just leave me here. I can’t do this anymore.”

Levi can feel something ugly rising in himself then, something vile and hateful that makes him drag Farlan onto his feet.

“You listen to me,” he whispers through gritted teeth. “I’ve had enough of your shit for one lifetime, alright? So you fucking get yourself together and start walking.”

As soon as he lets go of Farlan's sweater, the man falls back down, shaking his head. "I can't do it," he says again. "I can't do this anymore, I'm too tired, I can't--"

The hit has landed before Levi has had a chance to realise what he's about to do, a hard smack across Farlan's face that makes the tears in his eyes spill out onto his cheeks.

"I said get up!" Levi hisses, hitting Farlan again when he doesn't move. "Do you want to die? Is that it?"

"I don't care!" Farlan snaps back at him, holding his cheek. "I don't care what they'll do to me anymore, I don't care if they kill me! Anything's better than this, I'm too tired, I can't--"

"No one's fucking leaving you here!" Levi growls, pulling on Farlan's arm so hard he can hear the sound of his bones cracking even beyond the loud yelp of pain he lets out. "Get on your fucking feet! Do you want us all to get--"

"Levi, stop it."

Erwin walks up and grabs a hold of Levi's wrist, guiding him away from Farlan gently but firmly. Levi walks over to Isabel, his breathing falling heavy and full of anger as he looks at Erwin as he crouches down next to Farlan. He can't hear what they talk about but in the end Farlan lets Erwin help him to his feet.

"We'll stay here for the rest of the day," Erwin informs Levi and Isabel. "You three should rest. I'll go and find us some water."

"I'll come with you," Levi offers at once, but Erwin shakes his head.

"You should stay, get your strength up," he says, but the careful glance he casts in Farlan's direction tells Levi that's not why he should stay. "I'll be back before it gets dark."

Watching Erwin walk away leaves a heavy knot in the pit of Levi's stomach, an unease he can't shake that makes him pace around their camp aimlessly while Farlan and Isabel eat the rest of their dried peas; the crunching sound their mouths make seems to rival the gunshots, which have again moved closer. Levi holds the gun in his hand, loading and unloading and reloading it over and over though the weight of it makes his wrists and fingers hurt. For a few hours the forest grows quiet, a moment of peace from the war, until series of shots start to ring out again, closer than before. Levi grits his teeth and tries to sit still, jumping to his feet a few minutes later. The fear that he has fought to keep at bay finally breaks loose as the evening begins to fall, the darkness descending under the branches forcing Levi to a decision.

"I'm going after Erwin," he tells Farlan and Isabel, handing over the gun and the watch. "He's been gone too long. Something might have happened."

"You don't even know where he's gone to," Farlan argues. "You'll just get lost out there."

"I know which way the river is," Levi says. "More or less, anyway. Erwin's the only one who knows how to get to the camp. If we don't have him, we're as good as dead. If there's a chance I can find him I'll take it."

“We should come with you then,” Farlan says, and Isabel’s already getting to her feet when Levi shakes his head.

“You two should stay here,” he tells them quietly. “Get some rest, like Erwin said. Besides, if something’s gone wrong there’s less of a chance of me being seen by myself.”

“So I suppose we’ll just... wait here then,” Farlan agrees and sighs. “What are we supposed to do if neither of you comes back?”

Levi glances at Isabel’s upturned face, cringing at the worry he finds there.

“Keep going,” he tells them firmly. “We can’t be far from the border. Just keep walking until you start hearing people speaking French.”

They both nod solemnly before Levi turns away, heading to the same direction Erwin did so many hours earlier. He walks through the darkness, his steps accompanied by the constant rattle of gunshots and soon he realises he’s moving straight toward them. It makes his heart beat faster, sets a fluttering fear to his legs and forces him to pick up his pace though he thought he was already walking as fast as he is able. Levi’s gaze moves wildly between the trees, trying to catch a deeper shadow, a human shape, anything but the pitch black that his eyes are quickly growing numb to. Every once in a while he stops to listen but the night yields him no sound or lead and he’s forced to carry on aimlessly, fumbling in the dark, feeling blinded by the fear that grips his body rather than by the lack of light.

When he stops to catch his breath for a moment he finally hears it: the softest sound of splashing water.

“Erwin?” he whispers; the layer of dead leaves seems to swallow up the sound. “Is that you?”

“Levi,” a voice answers from the dark; Levi can feel his hands and feet prickling with relief as he walks forward. “You were supposed to stay in the camp.”

“You were supposed to be back before dark,” Levi counters, coming up to Erwin. “You found water?”

“There were soldiers by the river. I had to hide and wait,” the man explains, getting the jerry can off his back for Levi to drink. “I’m sorry.”

Levi shakes his head, not caring very much whether Erwin sees it or not. Another series of shots rings out from somewhere behind them and Levi swings the jerry can onto his back.

“We should go,” he whispers. “I left Farlan and Isabel by themselves.”

They head back along the same route Levi used, the gunshots in the distance lending speed to their steps. Levi hands the jerry can to Erwin after a while when he notices it slowing him down. They don’t speak and Levi’s grateful for that. He fears opening his mouth will break down the dam in his mind that’s holding in all his questions and doubt; they feel like a soundless panic running on his heels, always just about to catch up to him, always reaching for his throat. He keeps his eyes on Erwin’s back, tries to focus on this instead: Erwin’s still

here, he's still alive, they still have a chance to make it through this if they just get to the camp, if Isabel and Farlan get some water to drink, they can keep going tomorrow, they will have rested enough.

They reach the camp. A glance, and the thought turns to ash.

There are clothes lying on the ground. Levi recognises a jumper, a glove, a pair of trousers. Newspaper clippings – Isabel's U-Boats. The makeshift tent in a bundle with dark smears across the fabric. The suitcase lying empty and broken on its side.

Farlan and Isabel.

They're lying on the ground, ragged and carelessly tossed aside just like the clothes. He's on his back, eyes staring blankly at the night sky, the blood from the bullet wound drawing a line across his forehead. Isabel's on her side, lying on top of a small black puddle, her arms reaching out to him as if she wished to hold him. They're still – so sickeningly still.

Levi feels Erwin catch his scream into the palm of his hand, muffle it, turn it from wailing to whimpering, pull him close to his body, keeping him there when he fights against his strength, to be free to rage, to be free to go to them, to touch them, to make sure they're only sleeping.

"Quiet now," Erwin whispers calmly, holds Levi close with all the force of his arms; Levi makes him use it. "It's alright, Levi. It's alright."

Levi catches his hand with his teeth and bites down, tasting blood in his mouth when he falls heavily to the ground, barely managing to crawl when Erwin's weight is back on him. He growls and snarls, throws a punch behind him but the man's grip holds, keeping Levi down until a sound breaks the silence.

"Big brother?"

Levi's heart stops, fills with hope that shatters when he gets to Isabel, sees the blood across her stomach, sees the failing spark in her eyes. She winces when he pulls her close, reaches up to his face with her hand, brushing a finger across his cheek.

"I'm sorry, Isabel," Levi breathes, barely aware of the words as he presses the palms of his hands against the wound. "I'm sorry, I never should have gone away, I never should have left you, I'm–"

"Don't worry, big brother," she says; the smear of blood by her mouth makes her smile look crooked. "It doesn't hurt that bad."

Levi holds her against him, losing count on how many times he says he's sorry, how many times he says it's going to be alright, how many times he tells her not to be afraid. He can hear her humming for a moment, the same lullaby he's heard her sing before, broken and breathy until it finally dies. Hours seem to pass. She grows cold in his arms, so lifeless, so

unlike herself that it breaks him all over again, breaks him so completely that when Erwin lays his hand on Levi's shoulder, he's convinced the man is the only living person in the clearing.

"Levi," Erwin whispers; Levi doesn't recognise the tone of his voice. "We can't stay here."

He looks down at Isabel, the slackness of her mouth, and realises her clothes are intact. It's a small relief that they didn't realise what she really was.

"Levi," Erwin says again, his hold on Levi's shoulder tightening. "We need to go."

"We can't leave them like this." His own voice sounds distant and dull.

"We don't have time to dig graves for them," Erwin tells him calmly.

Levi looks over at Farlan, only now noticing the dark stain on the front of his trousers. Without thinking about it further, he lays Isabel's head down on the cool ground and walks over to Farlan, looking down at him and taking in the pale grey of his eyes, the thinness of his face, the strange position of his right hand; someone's taken the gun from him. Levi kneels down and starts fiddling with Farlan's belt, his numb fingers slipping on the clasp.

"Levi," Erwin starts again, "we don't have time—"

"I'm not going to fucking leave him like this!" Levi hisses at him and he falls silent, bringing Levi a pair of trousers that he changes Farlan into, making sure to tuck his shirt under the waist and to button up his coat.

They lay them down next to each other under a tree, eyes closed and hands loosely clasping. They look like children, lost in the forest, far from home.

They find the partisan camp three days later.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- character death
- descriptions of filth
- arguing/fighting
- foul language

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Levi's clutch on Dieter's shins tightens as he pushes his weight against the kick, barely hearing the screams when he forces the man's legs down and back onto the stretcher. He glances quickly at Erwin who's holding down the torso; he still has the energy to soothe the poor bastard, grunting out a quick "easy now" that Dieter's unlikely to hear over the racket he's making; like he's letting out all the noise he kept in so well on their way to the camp. The task demands Levi's attention again when Dieter tries to kick at him, making Levi lean the entire weight of his body onto his legs.

Levi watches with a notable lack of interest as Nifa pours alcohol on the forceps before walking over to them and kneeling down.

"Someone shut him up," she mutters but neither Levi nor Erwin moves to grant her her wish until she plunges the pliers into the small round wound on the side of Dieter's thigh and Erwin clamps his hand over the man's mouth. "You're lucky, you know that Dieter? You won't even bleed to death!"

Dieter shakes his head, eyes wide with pain until he suddenly passes out. It takes Levi a moment to realise he can let go of his legs and he straightens his back slowly, shaking his trembling hands in irritation as the adrenaline starts to wear thin.

"Finally," Nifa sighs to herself, twisting the forceps for a moment before pulling the bullet out unhurriedly and dropping it onto the dusty ground. "That's all the help I need, thanks."

Levi catches Erwin's curt nod before he follows the man out of the sick tent. They stop a little way off and Erwin lights a cigarette, leaning onto a tree and rubbing his eyes. Levi can feel the stinging in his own, but the continuing trembling of his hands is a bigger concern. He shakes them again but it fixes nothing, and he turns to lean on the tree opposite Erwin, swinging the rifle down from his shoulder; he grew numb to its weight again.

"Should have known Dieter is a screamer," Levi says and Erwin coughs out a laugh. "I'm surprised he didn't break to it sooner."

“I suppose we’re lucky for that bit of resolve,” Erwin muses; Levi catches him frowning when he tries to stretch the tremor out of his hands. “You alright?”

Levi nods with a grunt and grits his teeth for a second, trying to push the mission further from his mind, how frantic he got trying to find the trench of the gunner, how that buzzsaw sound makes him shudder even now. In the end he only managed to take out four men out of the eight in total – probably why Dieter got shot, though there’s no way to be sure.

“Fucking forty-two,” Levi growls, pressing the heels of his hands against the closed lids of his eyes for a second before looking up at Erwin, catching the glowing tip of his cigarette. “Give me that thing.”

Erwin raises his brows and catches the smoke between his fingers, lifting it a little to confirm it’s what Levi meant before handing it over. Levi sniffs at it tentatively before placing it between his lips and inhaling; the taste is even more revolting than he thought.

“Fucking disgusting,” he tells Erwin, putting the cigarette out against the tree before handing the stump of it back to the man. “Can you even taste anything with that mouth of yours anymore?”

Erwin laughs warmly and pulls Levi closer from the back of his head. “Let’s go find something to eat,” he says, making Levi crinkle his nose.

“Not before we wash up,” he counters sourly. “You’ll put everyone off their food, the way you smell.”

Erwin laughs again and lets his arm fall heavily on Levi’s shoulder, walking with him back to their tent, a lopsided and patched-up thing, but still an improvement on the one they made at the cottage. It has had a previous owner, of course – everything in the camp has had at least one – someone who didn’t know to listen for that characteristic sound of the MG 42. It keeps them warm and their belongings dry, and at the end of the day it’s all Levi thinks it needs to do.

“You should shave too,” Levi tells Erwin in passing, throwing him a razor from the duffel bag; the man catches it with one hand and keeps it between his teeth while he finishes unbuttoning his shirt. “If I could find the fucking soap. Must be smaller than my thumb by now...”

Levi can hear Erwin grunting a hello at someone who passes the tent, and when the man’s shirt falls next to him, he catches the stench of fear-infused sweat coming off it, a reminder of how far they had to run to get to the camp. He keeps going through the bags until he finds the piece of soap he bought from Moblit with some old clothes. Behind him Erwin is already splashing cold water onto his face and neck. Levi touches his fingers to the buckle of the man’s belt as he walks past to grab the washcloths from the line that keeps the tent up; Erwin resigns with a sigh, taking off the rest of his clothes while Levi undresses as well. They scrub at each other’s bodies until their skins are pink and aching, taking turns at the small tainted and cracked mirror to shave their faces. By the time they’re done and getting dressed again, the sun has nearly finished drying their hair; Levi can feel it burning the skin of his neck where Erwin has trimmed his undercut.

“Good enough?” Erwin finally asks, making Levi sneer.

“It’ll do,” he allows, pushing the razor, mirror and soap back into the duffel bag before following Erwin to the food; barely warm soup that’s more water than anything else, but still better than nothing for chasing the sting out of his stomach.

Gelgar joins them while they’re eating, sitting down heavily on a tree stump with his own bowl of soup. He greets them with a curt nod, drinking the broth straight from the side of the dish.

“How’s the old rotgut factory?” Erwin asks him. “When will we be able to sample the product?”

Gelgar gets an expression on his face like he’s got painful gas. “I wish you didn’t call her that, chief,” he admits awkwardly. “She’s a fine old lady, and it’s a quality product she gives us.”

“It’s fermented piss, Gelgar,” Levi tells him sourly. “We’d be better off using it for cleaning the guns, or the medical supplies.”

“Harsh,” Gelgar declares dejectedly. “Very harsh. I swear on my mother’s life, you’ll never find a drop of piss in any of my moonshine.”

“Whatever potato peels and bits of roots you’ve thrown in there could’ve been used to feed someone,” Levi points out, readjusting the rifle so it leans against his other leg. “I bet you thought of that too, but decided to use them for your piss-project anyway.”

Gelgar lets out a heavy sigh. “Can you call your dog off me, chief?” he asks Erwin joylessly, making him laugh. “He’s insulting the fine traditions of brewing spirits that have run in my family for centuries.”

“I’m afraid I have no authority to do any such thing,” Erwin tells him cheerfully. “And regarding your family’s talent for brewing, wasn’t your grandfather executed when someone died drinking his products?”

“As if he could help the fact he was half blind,” Gelgar protests, sighing. “Poor bastard. One lousy brew and it’s all people remember.”

“Something wrong with the moonshine?”

Hange steps suddenly into the circle with Moblit, looking down at Gelgar and making him scratch the back of his head awkwardly.

“Nothing, boss,” Gelgar tells Hange hesitantly, “but in all honesty I was hoping you’d let us drink all of this one. I know you’ll want some for your experiments, but—”

“Ah, but they’re not experiments!” Hange exclaims, making Levi shudder a little. “The experiments are what comes after. I’m only collecting my data now.”

“Yes, well...” Gelgar starts again, killing a fly that lands on his neck. “Maybe you could have some from the next batch?”

“We’ll talk about it later,” Hange decides cheerfully before turning to Levi. “Did you take out that MG yet?”

The question makes Levi grit his teeth and shake his head sharply. “They’ve got eight men on it now,” he says in short. “I ran out of time.”

“They’re still adding more?” Moblit asks, shaking his head a little when Levi confirms it. “How was the mission?”

“Dieter’s injured. Bullet to the thigh,” Erwin explains, finishing his soup. “Nothing too serious. He’ll be fine.”

“Is that what the screaming was about?” Hange asks, turning to look past them toward the sick tent when Erwin and Levi both nod. “I was wondering about that.”

“That reminds me,” Gelgar suddenly says, standing up and emptying his bowl, “Commander wants a word with everyone at sundown. He’ll expect a mission report.”

Erwin nods as Gelgar takes his leave, heading down the small footpath to where he keeps the still. Levi can feel Erwin turning to look at him, that attentive, caring stare that makes the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He keeps his own eyes on the last bits of soup at the bottom of his bowl, bracing himself against whatever it is that Erwin’s about to say next.

“We should get some rest,” the man states as soon as he sees Levi’s finished with his food, getting to his feet.

“Ivan and Jürgen are going out to get water,” Levi tells him, though he knows it’s no use. “I’m going with them.”

“We’ve already had a mission today,” Erwin counters, just as Levi expected, “and we’ve got guard duty tonight. Please, I would appreciate it if you tried not to be so reckless.”

Levi stares at his bowl for another ten seconds before pushing to his feet and swinging the rifle onto his shoulder again, wishing he didn’t need to put it down. They leave Hange and Moblit to their meagre meals and walk back to the tent, lying down next to each other in the cramped space. The air is warm, they do just fine in their trousers and long-sleeved undershirts; Erwin even kicks off his boots. Levi folds his arms under his head, trying to stay still but failing; his foot drums a quick pulse onto the quilt they’ve lain down on the bottom of the tent. His hands keep tensing and relaxing.

“You’ll get that MG next time,” Erwin whispers, turning onto his side and looking at Levi. “What happened to Dieter isn’t—”

“I know it’s not my fault,” Levi says quietly, wishing they could talk about it directly and not through shit like this but knowing they can’t. “I’ll get the MG. I know.”

Levi lets Erwin pull him closer and remembers again the first nights, how they lay next to each other like brothers, arms barely touching. After all this time of growing closer, of being close, the distance felt strange and abnormal, and still like the only right thing they could do. For the first week Levi held onto the rifle while he slept instead of onto Erwin, preferring the cold, hard touch of wood and metal to the warmth of that embrace that he remembered feeling so good but the healing effect of which had so suddenly disappeared. Even now when Levi leans his cheek against Erwin's arm, it doesn't feel the same.

"We'll have to move the camp soon," Levi muses, yawning as Erwin agrees with a grunt. "That boozy shit had better take us closer to the river this time."

"It depends on whether he intends for us to keep moving east as the German troops retreat," Erwin responds, catching Levi's yawn. "Not all of us have such a stake in this that they'll want to move even further into the Reich, especially now that their homes are free."

"A smaller group would be faster, and more difficult to spot," Levi keeps thinking aloud. "Might not be the worst thing for some to turn back."

"We'll talk about it tonight, I'm sure," Erwin says, smiling quietly when Levi shuffles closer to him. "Would you like me to handle the mission report?"

Levi nods and shrugs. "You know me. I never have much to say."

"He'll say we need to get the MG again," Erwin says, "but you know it's not your—"

"I know," Levi interrupts again. "Not my fault. If he wants the fucking thing so badly he should go out and get it himself."

"He values your contribution," Erwin reminds Levi again. "You're the best shot we have, by far."

Levi grunts a reply but doesn't speak. He feels as though they've said all of this before, maybe more often than once. There's not enough to talk about, but the silence gets on both their nerves; it's too easy to think when they're not running their mouths. When the quiet lasts longer than he's comfortable with, Levi sits up slowly, stretching his shoulders and sighing; he can hear Erwin sitting up behind him.

"Aching again?" the man barely asks, starting to massage Levi's shoulders when he nods. "Are you sure it's not—"

"It's not the rifle," Levi says, knowing he's blamed everything else but the gun, from the amount of wood he's chopped to the amount of water he's carried back to the camp from the river. "It's just from lugging Dieter's heavy arse around."

"There's no need for you to carry that thing with you everywhere," Erwin still whispers, pushing into Levi as he runs the heel of his hand down his back. "Nothing bad will happen if you leave it by the tent sometimes."

Levi doesn't answer, resenting again that cautiousness in Erwin's tone, the care he takes with his words, like he's talking to someone else than Levi, to someone who's about to break. And still he knows Erwin's right, just as he knows he won't leave the rifle behind even though it weighs on his back and shoulders and knocks against his legs, bruising them. He leans into the roughness of the man's touch instead, preferring that to any kind words for how tangible it is, how well it keeps his mind in the moment, how well it makes him forget that buzzsaw sound of the forty-two. Encouraged by the movement, Erwin wraps his arm around Levi and pulls him closer and Levi lets him, thinking the kindest thing he can do right now is let the man read into the gesture what he wants.

Levi lies awake when Erwin nods off, counting the breaths the man takes, glancing at his wristwatch from time to time though it hardly makes a difference now how long has passed since they lay themselves down in the tent. He places his hand on Erwin's chest absently, calmed for a moment by that soft rising and falling until the idleness grows into a fire in his limbs, forcing him to his feet and outside. He strides around the camp helping anyone who needs it, even giving Gelgar a hand with his fermented piss. He's walking back hours later with his arms full of broken-down branches when Erwin finds him again, approaching quickly through the darkening evening, a lit cigarette between his lips.

"You should've slept," the man scolds him as firmly as he can, making Levi shrug.

"I'll sleep in tomorrow morning," he says and Erwin nods, though they both know he's barely slept four hours a night since they got here.

"I wish you'd stop leaving the camp without me," Erwin whispers, coming close enough to Levi to hear his heavy sigh.

"I didn't want to wake you," Levi says, feeling the feebleness of his explanation somewhere in the back of his mind. "You know I can't—"

"I know," Erwin interrupts him, looking Levi in the eye so earnestly and with such compassion that Levi has to turn away. "But I worry."

Levi lets the dry branches fall into a pile by the freshly lit fire, turning to stare at the ground and kicking at the dust aimlessly. There's an apology that's gotten stuck in his throat; it feels false to say he's sorry for not being able to stay still, for something he can't help. It seems even more pointless since he knows Erwin understands it even if he doesn't like it, and just like all those times before, Erwin merely sighs and rubs at the back of his head.

"Well, I suppose it is what it is," he mutters, putting out his smoke. "Try and be careful."

Levi grunts a reply and nods at Hange and Moblit as they walk past, spotting more people gathering nearby. He nods for Erwin to follow and they take their places in the circle by the fire, stretching their hands toward the flames and eating their evening rations – boiled beets and stale bread – while they wait for commander Pixis.

"The good-for-nothing drunk is late as usual," Levi complains to Erwin under his breath; the title in front of the name still makes him itch with something, though it took him a week to

remember he used to call Erwin that. “I’ll bet you anything he’ll go straight to Gelgar to ask about his mission first.”

Erwin laughs, falling quiet as everyone else does when the old man finally does arrive. He takes a seat by the fire, making a show of how good the warmth is on his achy old bones, accepting his beets and bread, slicing up the former and putting it on top of the latter. Levi counts five large gulps he takes from his flask in between bites before he finally speaks.

“Dieter’s missing.”

“Injured during today’s mission,” Erwin says loudly enough for everyone to hear; the obedience in those low, resonant words makes Levi shiver. “A gunshot wound to the side of his thigh. He’ll need to recover for a while but it’s not life-threatening.”

Pixis nods, taking another sip off his flask and scratching at his bald head before asking, “How was the mission?”

“We were unable to acquire the machine gun,” Erwin says; short and to the point, it’s what Levi likes about him. “The new information we were able to gather suggests the enemy has added personnel to man it. As of now the count stands at eight men.”

“We need that machine gun.”

“We are aware,” Erwin replies without a hint of emotion piercing through his tone.

“We’ve lost too many lives to it already,” Pixis goes on, and Levi can see him turning his old, squinty eyes on him. “I’m sure you understand I gave you our best rifle in the hopes you’d be able to make the most of it.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “If you think you can do a better job with it you’re free to join Erwin on the next mission,” he retorts dryly. “If you can take out eight men in less time than it takes for them to realise where the person shooting at them is hiding, I’ll give the rifle back right now.”

Pixis stays quiet for a moment before laughing. “I always forget how easily insulted you young people are,” he says, still guffawing. “Us old farts don’t care anymore how people see us. Well, I’m sure the two of you can think of a new strategy. Whatever it is you did this time clearly isn’t working.”

“If we had an additional rifle we could—”

“Should Mike and Nanaba return, you have my permission to utilise whatever weapons they have,” Pixis interrupts Erwin. “Until then, this is all we can give you.”

“I understand,” Erwin says, his posture easing as soon as Pixis turns to Gelgar.

“And how is our joint venture going?”

“Told you,” Levi whispers to Erwin who laughs again.

“Well,” he mutters back, “it wasn’t the *first* thing he asked about.”

Levi clicks his tongue again. “Wonder which he thinks we need more, the MG or the moonshine.”

“I’m sure he values all of our lives more than he does his own thirst,” Erwin muses quietly. “He’s not wrong, though. We do need a new strategy.”

Levi grunts in agreement and they fall quiet to listen to the reports from the scouts. The German army camp hasn’t moved since the previous day, there’s nothing unusually suspicious they’ve been doing either. They’ve brought in dogs from God knows where, presumably to sniff them all out, but Pixis doesn’t seem very alarmed by that.

“They tried that before. It didn’t take us much to lose them by using the rivers and streams,” the old man says, his tone perhaps calmer than his thoughts. “But you all know there’s no oath or promise keeping you here. If you’d rather turn back, it’s up to you.”

There’s hushed mumbling in the crowd but no one moves. It makes Pixis smile so widely that the sides of his face get covered in wrinkles. Levi glances at Erwin and wonders if he ever thinks about it, about taking off one day and finding a spot out here in the wilderness, living rough for as long as the world will let them.

“Good. I’m glad this is your decision,” Pixis says. “Anything else noteworthy?”

Levi lets his mind wander when they start talking about the more mundane things: how much food they have left, how far the Allied troops are, how quickly they estimate they’ll be able to pack up everything and move should the situation demand it. Next to Levi Erwin stands nearly at attention, listening to every word as if knowing it all by heart will save his life one day. The camp has brought out this side of him, the Major Smith Levi hardly saw before, that military balance of following orders and being in charge that makes Levi’s skin itch like he’s meeting Erwin for the first time again. It makes him aware of that difference in height and build they have – something he already grew to ignore before – and now, with how well he knows Erwin, it’s no longer something threatening but has turned into something that can excite Levi, make him wonder, make him want.

“Who’s on guard duty tonight?” Pixis’ question brings Levi back to the moment.

“Levi and I have the second watch,” Erwin announces, his hands clasped loosely behind his back.

“Hange and I have the first,” Moblit voices, making Pixis nod.

“Everything in order then,” he says, pushing onto his feet wearily. “Carry on.”

“And remember, no fucking on guard duty,” Marlene tells Levi and Erwin as she walks past. “If I die because you two couldn’t keep it in your pants, I’m coming back to haunt you.”

Erwin laughs and Levi clicks his tongue. “Worry about your own pants,” he tells her dully, making her chuckle.

“Oh, I do,” she replies, trying to see over the heads of the others and speeding up her steps when she spots someone she was looking for.

“It’s quite something,” Erwin mutters, looking after her, “the way people don’t care.”

Levi grunts an acknowledgement to the words but doesn’t think about them much further. Marlene’s words have gotten stuck in his head and all he can think about are the three hours before guard duty and what they will be good for, what they can do to make the hours go by, to make themselves not think. They’ve barely reached the tent when Levi starts pulling at Erwin’s clothes, pushing him onto the floor of the tent and climbing on top of him, sitting a little higher than his thighs now, feeling the hardness underneath him already.

“Levi—” Erwin starts, but Levi smothers the rest of the words with a kiss.

“I want...” he breathes, fingers already teasing open the clasp of Erwin’s belt. “Please...”

Levi doesn’t want any hesitation from Erwin now, and the strength with which the man grabs his waist makes him sigh quietly with relief. He lets Erwin press his palm against his cock through his trousers, lets him catch his hasty gasp into his mouth when they kiss again, lets him push his hand past the waistband and close Levi’s prick into his fist. He arches into the touch, hands forgetting their task with Erwin’s belt for a moment until the man thrusts upward with his hips and reminds him. Levi fumbles with the belt, unfastens the trousers to feel that heat and hardness against his skin.

“Do you have it?” Levi whispers; the words send Erwin’s hands into his pockets.

“Are you sure you want to—”

“Yes,” Levi gasps, feeling Erwin’s stubble against his cheek when they kiss again. “Yeah, I want it, just...”

He rolls off Erwin to kick off his left boot, feeling the cold night air when his sock leaves with it. He pulls his leg out of the trousers before getting back where he was; he can feel the goosebumps rising on his skin when Erwin runs his hands down over his lower back and onto his arse. Levi expects the oily wetness of his fingers but the feeling still makes him shiver.

“Can’t you hurry up with that?” he huffs, not knowing whether he wants to get it over with or whether he wants it to last the whole night.

“Get on your back,” Erwin commands in a whisper, but Levi shakes his head.

“I don’t want you to do it like—”

“I’m not just going to fuck you like this, Levi,” Erwin tells him, something in his voice that approaches anger. “There are some things you shouldn’t rush.”

Levi considers the words, gritting his teeth around them before finally accepting and rolling onto his back, allowing Erwin on top of him. Their eyes meet in the dark, locking onto each other as Erwin slides his hand between Levi’s legs, first on his prick but quickly past it. The sudden pressure makes Levi’s breath hitch in his throat; it escapes a moment later in a long,

quiet hiss when Erwin takes him in his mouth and pushes deeper. Levi looks down at the mop of blond hair he's clutching with his fingers, letting his focus shift to that steady up and down, in and out. He lets it empty his mind, to dissolve for a moment the barriers he fights to keep up even in his sleep, to give him a break from that constant struggle. Even in the dark, Levi can see the hint of blue in Erwin's eyes when the man glances up; he's not concerned for Levi now, and it's good he gets his rest too.

The gun oil only takes out the worst of the pain, but Levi doesn't mind it. It strengthens the distraction, roots him so firmly to the here and now that for a fleeting, blissful moment it's almost possible to forget all life and world outside them. Underneath him Erwin groans; Levi can feel the low susurrant of the sound against the fists he's formed around Erwin's shirt. He grits his teeth not to swear, knowing Erwin would hate himself for any sign of discomfort from him, not wanting to spoil this now when Erwin feels so tangible that his mere presence is almost enough to be a comfort. Levi loses his erection as soon as Erwin is inside him; it's too much pain and not enough pleasure, still not enough of the things he knew all those years ago in Berlin, too much of what came after. As Levi presses his forehead against Erwin's shoulder, he thinks about how gruesome the act is and how perfect at the same time, how painfully wrong their reasons are and still, how painfully right.

Erwin pulls out before he finishes, gasping against the kiss Levi rewards him with; there's enough to worry about in getting clean without all that. They lie there catching their breaths before washing up quickly, returning to savour the moment of peace this has bought them. Levi curls up against Erwin, cheek pressed against his arm, like he used to do a lifetime ago in the man's bed. He can feel Erwin's eyes on him, that attentive stare that the stillness they've found makes bearable.

"I wish it didn't have to be like this," Erwin suddenly whispers; an insult to the calm. "I wish it could be different. With you, I wish it could..."

Levi doesn't speak, merely closes his eyes and lets his body move closer to Erwin's, grateful when the man doesn't continue and lights a cigarette instead. It's a dangerous thing, naming their regrets now, and Levi knows better than to try it.

"It could be worse," he says instead, hoping Erwin knows how much he means it.

They fall quiet again, dozing off until Moblit comes to wake them. Sitting up makes Levi wince with pain and hiss a swear under his breath; the flash of guilt on Erwin's face forces anger into Levi's tone.

"It's fine," he mutters. "Don't worry about it."

Still the first steps he takes outside the tent are tentative at best and by the time they reach the outer perimeter of the camp, the dull ache has turned into an itch that makes Levi shove his hand in his trousers every couple of minutes.

"Stop scratching it," Erwin tells him in a low whisper when they're outside the camp. "You'll only make it worse."

“I thought the gun oil was supposed to help,” Levi complains, straightening his underwear before pulling his hand out of his pants.

“I told you, it dries your skin,” Erwin whispers, shifting restlessly as he walks, stopping when they come to a fork in the small footpath they’re following. “We’ll need to split up here. Don’t scratch yourself.”

The discomfort of the guard duty doesn’t ease even the following day, nor the one after that; in the back of his mind Levi knows he’d be grateful for the distraction if taking a shit didn’t make him break a sweat and grit his teeth. The only thing more irritating is the apology that’s now permanently stuck on Erwin’s features, as if he were the only one responsible for Levi’s condition. Combined with the care he’s taken with Levi at every turn since they got to the camp, it’s nearly enough to make him want to walk out into the forest and stay there.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Levi finally huffs at him when they’ve managed to sit down for their morning rations.

“Like what?” Erwin asks, thick brows drawn to a frown, and realising Erwin really isn’t aware of what he’s doing only makes Levi more annoyed.

“Like I’m a friend whose house you burned down,” Levi mutters, nodding a good morning at Nifa as she walks by. “It’s not your fault so stop blaming yourself.”

“I’m aware it’s not entirely my—”

“Then act like it,” Levi snaps, tearing a mouthful out of his chunk of bread.

Erwin’s reply is interrupted by a sudden commotion, the gathering of a crowd to the western entrance to the camp. Levi takes up the rifle, hands ready to load it when Erwin stops him.

“Friends,” he whispers, getting to his feet and marching off toward the people.

Levi follows him more slowly, swinging the rifle onto his shoulder as he walks. He can see Mike’s head above the rest long before he reaches the crowd, and the sight makes him smile and utter a laugh. He takes the path Erwin has carved through the throng, nodding at Nanaba when their eyes finally meet. She rushes forward to wrap her arms around him for no longer than a few seconds.

“I’m so happy to see you both,” she tells Levi with her heavy French accent. “I was afraid you might not have gotten out of Dresden in time.”

“You have Erwin to thank for that,” Levi lets her know, not sparing a thought to the burning city now.

“I am not surprised,” Nanaba says, turning to embrace Erwin as well. “You always have one more trick up your sleeve, don’t you?”

Erwin utters a quiet laugh, lighting a cigarette. "I truly wish I did," he says, glancing at Levi too carefully for his liking.

"Most of the time," Mike adds, lifting the heavy bag they've brought with them off his shoulder. "That's almost as good as always."

"Where are Isabel and Farlan?" Nanaba asks now, face alight with excitement that makes Levi shudder and turn away. "Surely they were with you when you left the city?"

The image shoots through Levi's mind, ripping at his thoughts and nerves like a bullet: Farlan and Isabel lying under the tree, limp hands touching, eyes staring up at the night sky. Without saying anything further, without a glance at any of them, he turns on his heels and walks away, trying not to hear Nanaba coming to the right conclusion. He marches through the camp until he runs into Dirk and Thomas and joins them to fetch water from the river. Outside the camp nothing exists but uneasiness, the expectation that at any given moment the forty-two can start its deadly song. Under the trees, by the banks of the river everything else disappears; a morbid serenity that lets Levi breathe again, lets him fortify those barriers that keep out Farlan's nagging and Isabel's nightmares, all their evenings of playing cards, all the hours they spent by the Elbe.

He joins the day guard after that, not returning to the camp until nightfall though he knows Erwin worries. Even then Levi doesn't seek him out, choosing instead a quiet spot further from the fire to enjoy his evening rations. Everyone seems a little bit more cheerful now, perhaps because the day has been warm, perhaps because Mike and Nanaba have brought cheese and dried fruit with them; humble for spoils of war but nigh a feast for all of them. It's not until Pixis waddles past him that Levi realises the reason for high spirits in the camp is Gelgar's moonshine.

Levi watches as Erwin joins the crowd, meets his gaze but doesn't stand up or move closer, relieved when the man lets him be. He keeps an eye on him throughout the night, watches him empty a cup of moonshine and have a long conversation with Hange about something that draws those thick brows of his into a frown as he leans on his hand, an expression of stern concentration on his features. Every once in a while he nods or shifts his position, switching the leg he throws over the other before lighting a cigarette. Levi doesn't realise how intently he's been staring until Nanaba is standing in front of him, holding out a cup and asking to take a seat.

"I did say I wouldn't touch this shit," Levi says as he accepts the drink, "but since no one else has gone blind."

Nanaba laughs quietly and sits down with a sigh as Levi takes a tentative sip from his cup; the stuff makes his eyes water and burns in his mouth and throat long after he's managed to force it down.

"Erwin was looking for you," Nanaba tells Levi quietly.

"He does that," Levi replies with a shrug, feeling a sting of guilt nonetheless. "I should never keep him wondering."

Nanaba agrees with a quiet hum. "But you cannot help that he worries," she says. "I think he would worry even if he knew where you are all the time."

Levi lets out a joyless laugh. "Probably," he admits, taking a larger sip, hoping it would be possible for him to get drunk from just the little cupful.

"He told me what happened," Nanaba whispers without looking at Levi. "I'm sorry."

"I know," Levi mutters, grudging her for bringing it up but knowing she needs this now. "You cared for them too."

Nanaba agrees again. "Isabel was..." she starts, her words trailing off as she stops to wipe her nose on her sleeve. "Well, there will never be anyone like her again."

Levi nods, pushing away Isabel's smile, her cackling laugh, the tangled mop of her hair, the quiet lullaby she sang when she lay dying in his arms. He can feel it all, choking him, stabbing his chest, making his body brittle and small. This isn't the place for someone like that. The forty-two will cut down people for less.

"It might sound strange," Nanaba starts now, "but I find myself growing stronger with loss."

Levi turns to look at her, forgetting the cup that's on its way to his lips. "How do you mean?"

"I am afraid there will not be many people who will remember Isabel once this is all over," she says mournfully. "Her whole family was killed. If I don't survive, if you do not, who will remember her then?"

Levi takes another burning gulp of the moonshine and frowns at the words. "She told you about things like that?" he asks. "About her family?"

Nanaba nods. "Her family were gypsies. They travelled along the coast of the Baltic Sea."

"What happened to them? To Isabel?"

"What do you think?" Nanaba asks him back, scoffing. "This was before they started killing people at the camps. She told me how they dug long rows of mass graves in the sand and shot them right there."

"How did she survive?" Levi asks, forgetting his drink again as he listens to the story.

"The soldier who shot at her missed, but she was holding her mother's hand and got pulled into the grave," she tells him quietly. "Later when they walked over the bodies killing everyone who had survived, another soldier noticed she was still alive but instead of shooting her he told her to lie very still and very quiet. He came back for her later that night. Together they made it somewhere past Berlin before he was caught and she continued on her own."

"Who was he? The soldier?"

Nanaba shrugs. "All she knew was that his name was Hans, and he had always wanted to be in a U-Boat crew," she says, suddenly smiling warmly. "I suppose he taught Isabel everything

she knew about them.”

Levi frowns into his cup as he drinks. “Why would he help someone like her though?”

Nanaba shrugs again. “As far as I understand it, after seeing what happened on that beach he decided he wanted no part in it,” she says, staring at her feet. “Just think. Without him Isabel would never have made it to Dresden, would never have met you, and this is all we know about him.”

Levi turns his eyes back toward the people around the fire, toward Erwin, and thinks about Isabel’s story, tries not to imagine her lying next to her dead mother for a whole day. He wishes now that he had known – there is something similar in this to his own past, and perhaps they could have been of comfort to each other in it, since few people will ever know how it feels. It’s another thing on Levi’s long list of regrets now, and he turns his mind away from it before he can begin to take stock of the rest.

“Thank you,” he says, turning to Nanaba, “for telling me all this.”

Nanaba nods. “I cannot be sure she wanted you to know,” she replies, “but I think she would have told you in the end. Maybe she just thought you had enough to worry about.”

Levi grunts and empties his cup. There’s a lot he’d like to say about what happened: that he’s glad she wasn’t alone when she died, that he’s glad he was there to change Farlan into a clean pair of trousers, that he wants revenge, that he knows it was his fault, that there’s a part of him that will never be the same now, never intact. In the end he says nothing, and Nanaba doesn’t ask him about it, and they sit quietly staring at Erwin and Mike by the fire.

“Poor bastards,” Nanaba finally voices, sighing into her cup. “Neither of them will feel any of this.”

Levi lets out a quiet laugh, following Nanaba and getting to his feet, noticing only then how unsteady his legs feel, and remembering again what ails him. He walks after Nanaba, laying his steps so carefully that it prompts Mike to ask him how much he’s had to drink.

“Mind your own business,” Levi tells him sourly, sitting down next to Erwin almost as carefully as he walked before.

“I’ll say nothing more about it,” Mike mutters, throwing an arm’s length of an old branch into the flames.

“If you’re injured you should report it to Pixis,” Hange points out. “If your ability to carry out the mission has been compromised–”

“Same goes for you, four-eyes,” Levi snaps, leaning slightly against Erwin’s hand when he feels it behind his back. “There’s nothing to report. End of story.”

For a moment they all sit in silence until Hange asks Mike and Nanaba for more news they’ve heard on their supply run.

“The Red Army is drawing closer to Berlin,” Nanaba says. “Reeves had heard from someone the city’s not expected to last another month.”

“We’ve started to push through in Italy as well,” Mike mutters, poking at the fire with a long branch. “That’ll give us what’s left of the south and west.”

Erwin agrees in a hum. “Any news on the treatment of the civilians?”

Nanaba and Mike exchange a grim look before he mutters, “It’s what you’d expect. Most of them are told to pack up their things and leave.”

“We heard rumours that in some areas hundreds of people have killed themselves,” Nanaba goes on, staring at the fire. “Whole villages just swept up in a wave of panic. Whole families...”

They all fall silent again, and though Levi wants to say they had it coming, that it’s no more than a consequence of their own actions, he can’t. He glances over at Erwin, whose expression shows the deep concern he was expecting.

“What about partisans?” Moblit finally asks. “They’ve been received well?”

“As far as we can tell,” Nanaba says. “They’ve been helping out elsewhere too. Yugoslavia, Serbia...”

“We heard the Germans are calling on the kids from the Jugend to fight,” Mike explains, scoffing. “Many of them are so fanatical they’ll fight till the last man – or boy.”

“This fucking war,” Nanaba hisses, spitting onto the ground. “Why won’t those bastards just surrender already?”

“It’s what Hitler’s been saying since the beginning,” Erwin says. “To him death is preferable to surrender.”

“We’ll do our part here,” Hange joins in, tone suddenly severe. “It’s nearly done. They’re at the edge of the cliff. All they need is a small gust of wind.”

“With the weapons you brought we’ll have a better chance of obtaining the machine gun,” Erwin tells Nanaba and Mike. “We’ll need you to man the other rifle, Mike. You’re our best shooter after Levi.”

Mike turns to look at Nanaba, waiting for her nod before doing the same. Levi glances at Erwin, rolling his eyes at the soft smile on his face.

“Good,” Erwin states, getting to his feet. “As long as we’re all in agreement about that. The rest of the plans can wait until tomorrow.”

“You’re off already?”

“We both need our rest,” Erwin tells Hange, looking over at Levi until he pushes onto his feet with a sigh.

“This place has made you bossy,” he complains quietly, following Erwin out of the glow of the fire and into their tent where he lies down, placing his boots next to the rifle and yawning. “I guess you’re not wrong though.”

“No, I don’t believe I am – in this,” Erwin replies, handing Levi a small flat metal container.

“What’s this?” Levi asks, examining the lid but not understanding the letters. “Some sort of Soviet stuff?”

“I traded it from Nifa,” Erwin explains, pulling off his boots as well. “It’s supposed to be good for scratches and abrasions and the like.”

Levi pushes one of his nails under the lid and eases it open; the contents smell of resin, fresh and clean and oddly comforting. The scent reminds him of the days in Erwin’s apartment when he would scrub the floors, tracing the knots in the wood with his eyes. Here, in their little tent that barely keeps out the cold, it doesn’t seem real.

“I thought it might help you with your problem,” Erwin spells it out for Levi, making him click his tongue.

“What did you trade for it?” he asks, taking some of the salve onto his fingers and applying it carefully.

“Something I could afford to lose,” Erwin says, smiling when Levi grunts a thank you and lies down next to him.

“I’m scared shitless of the day when you won’t remember to think of everything,” Levi tells him, pressing his back against Erwin’s chest and pulling a heavy quilt on top of them both. “We’re all too used to it by now.”

He can hear Erwin chuckling breathily behind him. “You’ll help me keep my wits sharp, I’m sure,” he mutters, and they both fall quiet, dozing off for good few hours.

It’s the first time Levi wakes up later than Erwin, exiting the eerily silent tent to find the man riffling through maps, a cup of cooled down tea next to him on the ground. He flashes Levi a quick smile as he sits down, turning back to his papers like for some reason he finds them the most irritating thing in the camp. Levi watches Erwin taking a sip from his cup and grimacing, his right leg twitching so badly it shakes the cup in his hand.

“Do you need to take a piss?” Levi asks him, looking pointedly at the leg when Erwin merely frowns at him.

“No, I didn’t even notice,” the man mutters; his leg stays still for barely thirty seconds before it starts twitching again.

“I’ll go find us something to eat,” Levi tells Erwin who grunts a reply without looking up from his work; when Levi returns with more tea and a few slices of bread, Erwin seems surprised.

“You brought breakfast?” he asks, making Levi click his tongue.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you?” he asks sourly, handing Erwin his share; the twitching of his leg catches his eye again.

“Sorry,” the man mutters, weighing the maps down with a rock and turning to Levi. “I’ve been trying to focus.”

Levi clicks his tongue again and bites into his bread. “Have you been up for long?” he asks, calling out Erwin’s name when he doesn’t seem to hear.

“No, only for a few hours,” Erwin tells him, sipping at his tea. “I’ve been trying to find the optimal positions for you and Mike. I’m hoping if we fire at the machine gun from two locations at once, it’ll buy us enough time to take out the soldiers manning it.”

“I’d gathered as much,” Levi says, peering down at the maps, though they make little sense to him. “Any luck?”

“I’m still struggling with the second location,” Erwin admits. “I want them both to be as secure as possible.”

Levi nods, taking another large bite out of his bread. “I get wanting the gun to keep them from shooting at us,” he says, voicing something he’s been thinking for a while, “but couldn’t it be used in an attack? Against the army camp?”

“I doubt Pixis has that in mind,” Erwin tells him. “Sabotage is much more his thing than planning a military offensive. I would be very surprised to hear that he’s planning to use it for any purposes that aren’t strictly defensive.”

“Good,” Levi says emphatically. “Leave that hornet’s nest the fuck alone. We’ll all be better off for it.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Erwin agrees; the twitching of his leg makes Levi wonder if the plan is making him nervous.

Erwin’s strange mood seems to worsen as the day drags on, making him tense and shortening his temper until he snaps at Ivan and Jürgen for complaining about guard duty. By midday there isn’t a soul in the camp who wants to come within a hundred metres of him, and the spot where he sits with Levi, going over his maps, is surrounded by a circle of empty space. Levi says nothing about any of it though it makes him anxious and irritated in turns – not a word, until a little while before their evening rations Erwin starts biting his nails.

“Stop that,” Levi commands him at once, slapping his hand away from his mouth. “Fucking disgusting. Do you have any idea how long it’s been since your hands have been properly clean?”

“Levi–”

“No, don’t do that,” he counters at once. “I don’t know what the fuck your problem is but this is fucking ridiculous.”

Erwin stares at him for a moment, heavy brows drawn to an angry frown, until he submits with a deep sigh, the heel of his right leg rubbing against the tree stump he's sitting on.

"It's nothing," he mutters. "You shouldn't worry about it."

"It sure as hell is something," Levi argues, gritting his teeth. "If even you're so scared of this mission, we should tell Pixis to shove that MG up his—"

"There's nothing wrong with the mission," Erwin interrupts him, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "I just..." His words trail off and he lets out a laugh. "I just haven't had a cigarette today, that's all."

Levi stares at the man in a stunned silence for a moment, frowning. "I thought you got more from Mike and Nanaba."

"I did," Erwin confirms, making Levi's frown deepen.

"Well then why..."

Suddenly Levi remembers the salve and Erwin's evasive words for how he got it. For the rest of the day he says nothing more about the man's mood, though he still gives him a slap on the wrist whenever he starts biting his nails. It's only later in the evening, when Erwin suggests executing the mission the following day, that Levi can no longer hold his tongue.

"The last thing any of us need is you losing your shit because you didn't have a smoke before we started," he says firmly. "It's not as if the Germans are going anywhere. We can take a day, get prepared."

"I'm with Levi on this," Mike agrees. "Nanaba and I could use the rest too. I don't see any reason for rushing it."

They spend the following day trying to keep busy, revising the plans Erwin has devised and ensuring from the scouts that the MG hasn't been moved. Whenever they get bored they try to guess the source of the commander's never-ending supply of liquor. Erwin seems to relax only a little, and Levi doesn't know whether to take him stopping his nail-biting as a sign of calmer nerves or of more fear for Levi telling him not to. Even so, they both manage a few hours of good deep sleep, more than enough to see them through the mission.

The forest is filled with that fear-induced calm that makes Levi feel better without fail, of that grounding stillness that draws every drop of his focus. They walk through it without making a sound, him, Erwin, Mike, Nanaba, Hange and Moblit. Levi keeps glancing at Erwin as they advance though he's the one thing that makes his heart beat faster and his breath hitch in his throat. It's the only thing he fears in the forest now: Erwin getting shot, Erwin lying dead on the ground, Erwin never getting a proper burial because there is no time for one.

They all follow Erwin as he leads them through the wilderness, crossing footpaths but never walking along them. The ground is uneven, rising steeply at times onto hills or lowering into

ditches and little streams that they wade across, gritting their teeth at the touch of the cold water. They finally stop when they get to a ridge where Levi, Mike, Nanaba and Erwin crawl up on their hands and knees to survey the surrounding areas from a vantage point, seeking out the locations Erwin marked in his maps. From on top of the raised ground Levi can see the German army camp as a brown blotch in the budding green of the forest.

“The MG is here,” Erwin whispers, pointing out the area on the map. “The west side of that hill there. You see?”

Levi peers through the scope of the rifle at the wooded area, spotting nothing but foliage and dirt.

“They’ve hidden it well, so you’ll need to look for it, but you should be able to identify your targets relatively easily from your positions,” Erwin says and Levi turns back to him and the map. “Levi, you’ll take the higher ground here, circling the hill from the south, where Mike will stay. We’ll give you an hour to get in positions before providing a distraction.”

“That will be a long wait,” Nanaba hisses, scratching at her hair and glancing worriedly at Mike.

Levi nods without speaking, feeling the beads of sweat gathering under his collar as the sun bears down on them. He looks over toward the army camp and grits his teeth.

“I’ll get the MG once we’ve handled the guard,” Mike says quietly. “It’s a heavy thing. I don’t think it’s wise for Levi to—”

It pierces so suddenly, firing so fast it sounds like cloth being ripped, that noise Levi’s learned by heart. He has barely enough time to see the stream of blood pouring out of the clean round wound on Mike’s temple when Erwin has clutched his arm and thrown him back. He tumbles down the ridge, the impact with the ground knocking the air out of his lungs though he tries to brace himself, tries to fold his arms over his head as grey blurs of stones flash past his eyes. Levi’s barely reached the bottom when he feels someone grabbing a hold of him again, yanking him to his feet from the back of his shirt: Nanaba.

“Run!” she shouts at him, pulling him along. “He’s right behind us, just run!”

Levi tears his eyes away from behind himself, from the sight of Erwin stumbling down the ridge, a smear of blood on his right sleeve. He can see Hange and Moblit ahead; they glance back once before focusing to keep their step on the uneven forest floor. Levi fights for breath, shutting out everything, making sure the only thing that exists is the ground under his feet, the whistling of the bullets, the sight of Nanaba’s back in front of him. He can hear her swearing when the barking of dogs starts behind them, angry and loud and piercing.

Levi loses sense of time and direction, grows numb to everything but the thought of survival. He only hesitates when he glances back and sees nothing but trees and undergrowth; no Hange or Moblit, no Erwin.

“He’s told them to split from us,” Nanaba tells him sternly, guessing his thoughts from his face; Levi flinches at the tears on her cheeks. “To throw off the dogs.”

They keep running, the barking grows louder when they near the partisan camp. Levi follows Nanaba as she starts veering north; they can't lead them to the others, not when they'll be so outnumbered. They grow breathless, Levi can feel his legs weakening from the exertion and from the way the rifle keeps smashing into them, slowing his pace. He can see the frustration on Nanaba's face when a kilometre since the stream they crossed, the barking is still growing louder. He watches as she reaches into her trousers and pulls out a bloody rag, swearing in French before throwing it on the ground.

"Bastards," she hisses, doubling back toward the stream. "Let their fucking hellhounds feast on that."

They wade along the stream until their feet and calves grow numb, struggling back into the camp at nightfall when the barking has ceased and the forest is quiet and dark, when they can walk past its trees like shadows. Even when they slow down from their run, Levi feels his heart beating so frantically it hurts. When they finally reach the others and Nanaba falls down on the ground by the fire, Levi's eyes blur from how desperately he's trying to find Erwin, to see his face, to see the heavy frame of his body in the crowd.

"Is Erwin not back yet?" he asks. "Or Hange and Moblit?"

Nifa shakes her head, kneeling down by Nanaba when she sees the blood on her face.

"It's not mine," Nanaba says in a hollow whisper that leaves Nifa speechless.

"What happened out there?" Pixis asks, looking more distraught than Levi's ever seen him. "Whose blood is it?"

"They moved the machine gun last night," Nanaba tells him quietly. "Mike's dead."

Levi watches the expressions on everyone's faces turn from concern to anger and sadness, but feels no room for either in his mind. They all fall quiet for a while out of some sort of feeling of duty, only starting to talk again when Nanaba gets up and leaves. Levi doesn't go after her. He doesn't have any words for something like this.

It's near dawn when they return to the camp, Moblit half carrying, half dragging Hange whose arm hangs limp and covered in blood from a wound to the shoulder. Levi watches them find seats on the ground, watches Nifa rushing over with her supplies, feels the world fall to ruin around him.

"Where's Erwin?"

Moblit looks up from Hange and Nifa and the apology in his expression makes Levi shudder.

"We got caught in a crossfire," Moblit tells him quietly. "Just a small patrol group, but enough with the forty-two to cut off our escape. He said he'd draw them out, that they'd hesitate to fire at someone in a German uniform."

“We doubled back when we were clear of the MG,” Hange continues. “We saw them take him. Last I know they were heading back to the camp. He was still alive then.”

Levi feels as though the breath he draws after Hange’s words is the first one he’s taken since they started running. Erwin is alive. All that matters is that Erwin is alive.

“He was shot in the arm when the forty-two—”

“We need to go get him,” Levi cuts off Moblit, swinging the rifle off his shoulder and turning to the others. “No point trying in the dark. We should go at first light. Their patrols do a round at—”

“We’re moving the camp.”

Levi turns to Pixis, his hands growing numb with a sudden rage. “What the fuck did you say?” he breathes, barely seeing the old man.

“We’re moving the camp tonight,” Pixis repeats. “We can’t be sure this won’t lead the enemy here. We’re retreating, pulling back across the border.”

“Not before we rescue Erwin,” Levi whispers. “I don’t know who the fuck you think you are but you—”

“Major Smith was a good man, and a first-class soldier,” Pixis interrupts him. “So were many others who have died in this war. What you’re suggesting would get even more such men killed, and that I will not—”

“I HAVE LOST EVERYTHING!”

The impassive look on the old man’s face doesn’t shift, doesn’t soften, doesn’t fall any closer to interest. Levi can feel his tears in his throat, it feels as though he might suffocate from them.

“We’ve all lost much in this war,” Pixis states calmly. “I’m sorry, but I can’t prioritise your loss over—”

“Don’t you fucking say another word,” Levi hisses at the old man, taking up the rifle. “You run like the fucking coward you are, but this’ll be the last you see of me.”

“You’re our best sharpshooter,” Pixis says. “Your services are still needed. I won’t let you—”

Levi snorts at the words, cutting them off. “There’s not a fucking person left in this camp I answer to,” he spits, “and you’d be my last fucking choice.”

He walks to the tent, hands still shaking with anger when he starts packing up their things: Isabel’s U-Boats, Farlan’s letters, taking only what is most important. It all fits into the duffel bag which he swings onto his shoulder, only stopping when he hears Nanaba calling out for him from the darkness.

“You should not go alone,” she says, her voice thick and muddled. “I will help you.”

“I don’t want you to—”

“If our places were reversed, would you do it?” Nanaba asks him and Levi falls silent, knowing he would, knowing her loss is as great as his would be. “I will help you get into the camp, but I won’t come there with you. It is a risk I am not willing to take.”

Levi nods, sitting down next to her, waiting for the sunrise, waiting to breathe.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- sexual content
- character death

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

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WARNINGS AT THE END

- h_helix

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

They set out at first light. Levi can feel the heaviness of the rifle on his shoulder, the solidity, the near-comfort. He can hear Nanaba's breathing in the silence of the woods, how it grows heavier when they cross ditches and wade through streams. They don't speak, barely look at each other; they already said all they needed to say at the camp.

They were nearly done packing everything up when Levi and Nanaba left, the tents in bundles on the shoulders of their owners, the supplies in a score of mismatched packs, Gelgar's copper still secured onto his back. Levi could sense Pixis' eyes on him even if he didn't look up, was prepared to be challenged for the rifle but in the end the old man let him go and even as he walks now, Levi wonders why, wonders whether the commander was simply too drunk to remember to ask for it back. Levi caught Nifa whispering their intended destination to Nanaba while they were pulling down the sick tent; another reason for Levi to make sure nothing happens to Nanaba during this mission.

They know the routes the German patrols take, – the scouts have reported them more often than once – far past the MG, for which Levi is grateful. They settle in to wait a few hundred metres from the path, Levi up in a tree, peering through the scope of the rifle. Nanaba reminded him before he climbed up that he needs to get them both – words Levi hardly needs, but they're something to focus on, something else to think about than the race of seconds and minutes and hours, the countdown to when it might be too late, when it will be.

He catches the dark green of their uniforms easily against the springtime glow of the forest floor and the foliage. Two solitary shots ring out in quick succession, and Levi watches from the distance as they both fall down, keeping his eye on them for another few minutes to make sure they're lying still. When he climbs down Nanaba acknowledges his good work with a nod, leading him quickly to the site where the new life pushing through the dark, rich earth has been watered with a shower of blood.

"If Erwin had found you sooner..." Nanaba whispers, shaking her head as Levi kneels down, barely giving the corpses a second glance as he starts to undress the other.

He switches quickly into a uniform, breathing shallowly until his nose gets used to the stench of sweat and piss coming off the fabric. He helps Nanaba drag the bodies into a ditch, breaks down branches to hide them from view as best he can, hiding the duffel bag next to them as well. They remind him of his first kill, the young soldier by the Elbe, but even that makes him think of Erwin, the weekend at the cottage, the way they played in the river, how different everything was between them after that.

“I will wait for you until dawn,” Nanaba tells Levi when they’re finally done. “If you are not back by then, I will have to leave without you.”

Levi nods. “I understand.”

“We will be heading southwest,” she says quietly. “If you get Erwin out alive, and if you can follow us, I would be very glad to see both of you again.”

“That’s been my plan from the start,” Levi tells her, remembering suddenly the first time they met, the stifled cackling of Nanaba, Farlan and Isabel during her first day in their apartment. “I’d hate to think this is goodbye.”

Nanaba smiles in a way that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “At the moment of parting, we must be happy to have known each other at all,” she whispers, pulling Levi into a quick embrace. “My best to Erwin.”

Levi nods curtly, adjusting the rifle on his shoulder as she takes her leave, disappearing soundlessly through the trees. He can feel his heart in his throat as he turns on his heels and starts heading toward the army camp, following the patrol route through the forest and up the sloping side of a hill. All of the ifs Nanaba used try to push through into his mind but he chases them away, filling his thoughts with nothing but Erwin: his smile, his laugh, the way he holds his cup and saucer, the way he pulls off his boots, the curve of his nose, the softness of his words, the guilt he deserves to be free of.

The walk is longer than Levi would have thought; from atop the ridge the camp seemed to be much closer but once he glimpses the edge of it through the trees, Levi realises it’s much bigger than he could have guessed. As he takes a turn onto a larger, more travelled path, an unimaginable stench wafts through the rapidly warming morning air – the reek of the latrines Levi catches a glimpse of not far off. He shudders and holds his breath, turning his eyes away from the bare-arsed soldiers he sights in the distance.

The camp’s only outer defences are three layers of barbed wire attached to heavy wooden poles. The path passes them through a gap that’s fitted with a boom that’s been lifted to let men pass, but guards have been posted to secure it. Levi feels a surge of nausea in his throat as he walks in, trying not to think about how he’ll manage getting Erwin out of the camp. The armed men who stand watch only look up from their mess kits when he’s about to pass them.

“You one of the new ones?” the older of them asks, answering Levi’s curt nod with the same. “If you didn’t get your rations yet, go get them now while there’s still some left.”

“Thanks,” Levi says, waving his hand a little as he marches further into the camp.

He follows the trickling flow of people, glancing behind himself as he passes the queue of soldiers who wait for their breakfasts, trying to look as busy as everyone else is. There's upheaval all around him: vehicles are being loaded with goods, there are men packing up everything from weapons to food. Levi even catches a glimpse of the forty-two, now mounted on the back of a truck. He grits his teeth against the thought it brings and keeps walking. When he reaches a large building in the middle, he guesses the camp must have grown around it – once a guest house, it must now serve as the officers' quarters, and quite possibly as a storage for a majority of the food. Levi speeds up his steps as he passes it, trying to look as inconspicuous as he can when he glances around himself.

He keeps up the pace until he can see the barbed wire fence ahead again and takes a left, catching a glimpse of a similar enclosure behind an outbuilding. When he gets closer he sees it's filled with people, men in uniforms but not ones of the Wehrmacht or the SS, and some in civilian clothing. British, French, Americans, Levi guesses, along with a few partisans the Germans have taken alive. They sit around on the muddy ground, some alone and dejected and others in small groups, conversing quietly among themselves. Levi's eyes search frantically, catch a score of blond heads but from this distance he can't tell if any of them is Erwin. He moves closer, jumping when a loud voice rings out.

“Hey! You there!”

Levi turns around to see a soldier marching toward him, feet kicking up dirt as he advances. Levi tries to assume a look of confusion and apology, pulling his head slightly between his shoulders.

“Yes?” he asks, making the man narrow his eyes.

“You here to relieve me from guard duty?” the soldier asks and Levi nods almost enthusiastically. “Well you're fifteen minutes late! I'm supposed to be laying landmines by now!”

“Sorry, I had the shits,” Levi blurts out, straightening the rifle on his shoulder nervously as he tries to stay in the role, wondering whether it was like this for Erwin to become Holtz. “I don't know what they put in the soup this morning but it's gone off a while ago.”

The soldier snorts impatiently and starts walking past Levi. “It's just you alone with these fucks – no one can spare the time to babysit them now – but some bastard still came and ripped me a new one for not staying on my feet.”

“Got it,” Levi calls out after the soldier, keeping his eyes on his back until he disappears behind the building.

He starts walking around the enclosure, eyes scanning the mismatched, miserable crowd within, the hollowed cheeks hidden by stubble or beard, the unkempt hair, the tattered clothes, all the time looking for that SS uniform he always hated but would now welcome the first glimpse of. But he sees nothing, doesn't see Erwin anywhere though he circles the fence twice. Finally he stops, getting on tiptoes to peer over the bent heads of the prisoners.

“I get a feeling like you are looking for someone.”

Levi turns toward the sound: a man not far from Erwin's age is sitting on the ground, leaning his head against a fence post. His voice is quiet and hoarse and his German broken, but Levi doesn't want to bend down to hear him better.

"A cute boy for you to play with, perhaps?" the man continues though Levi doesn't speak; the words make him screw up his face.

"Did they bring in anyone last night?" Levi whispers, barely glancing at the man, catching a glimpse of an officer's peaked cap in the distance. "A man? Tall and blonde, in an SS uniform?"

"Someone you know?" the man asks, making Levi grit his teeth not to shout at him. "Did he say you have lost the war? Is that why they locked him up?"

"It's not what you think," Levi tells him, trying to keep his patience. "He is injured and I need to find him."

"What can you give me," the man wants to know, turning his sunken eyes to Levi, "for telling you what I know?"

"Nothing," Levi breathes, desperation seeping into his voice. "I have nothing to give, and I can't get you out. I need to find my friend, with or without your help."

"So I should help some Nazi shit find a Nazi friend of his," the soldier muses, laughing joylessly to himself. "Then again, how do I know you are not just trying to trick me? Maybe if I speak you will torture me for speaking."

"I told you, it's not what you think," Levi says again, hissing a swear under his breath when he sees a German soldier approaching with haste.

"I know, I'm late," he calls out some metres before he gets to Levi. "This place is a fucking mess. No one even gave me my fucking orders and still I get shouted at."

"You think I give a fuck?" Levi snaps at him. "There better be soup left for me or you'll have one more problem to deal with."

"I don't know why we need to watch these clowns," the soldier mutters. "Half of them will die when we march them out anyway. What difference does it make?"

"Fuck if I know," Levi grunts, swinging the rifle onto his shoulder and pulling out the dead soldier's mess kit. "I'm off to find some food."

"I heard it gave someone the shits."

"When doesn't it?" Levi huffs, giving the man one more lazy nod before walking off, chewing his lip as he tries to think, tries to keep his panic from drowning him, tries to hold on to the belief that this doesn't mean they've already done what Levi fears the most.

It's not inconceivable that they wouldn't put Erwin in with the rest of the prisoners. After everything he's done, after all the time he spent fooling everyone and stealing their secrets,

there must be people whom he's made very angry, who want to see him die, who want to be there when it happens. Would they try to move him? Had they already? Levi walks around the outbuilding and back toward the guest house, thinking to buy himself time by joining the line to the food. Someone tries to start a conversation with him, but the unenthusiastic grunt he gives as a reply puts an end to the half-hearted attempt. There is no glory of the German people here, no unquenchable thirst for victory; just a group of tired, disillusioned men who look ready to surrender, casting grim glances at any officer who passes them.

When he gets his lukewarm soup – he can barely feel it through the metal of the mess kit – Levi walks back to the guest house, not knowing where else to start than here. They wouldn't keep Erwin outside; they wouldn't want any misunderstandings, wouldn't want the soldiers to think Erwin is some SS-officer turned army deserter. Levi walks up the stairs into the building, careful not to spill the soup, and enters through the main door.

Inside the building the chaos rages far worse than outside it; people run across rooms and down hallways, call out names and ask for directions, and Levi can't help but wonder what the soldiers in the camp would do if they knew – as it now seems to him – that no one is really in charge here anymore. He closes the lid of the mess kit to keep the soup from spilling as someone runs past him and nearly knocks him over. No one seems to realise he's entered the building until a heavy-built officer stomps down the stairs from the second floor and starts questioning him on why he's there.

"Food, sir," Levi says, trying to sound timid again as he lifts the mess kit, "for the prisoner."

"Who the fuck authorised that?!" the officer shouts; Levi can feel a bit of spittle landing on his face.

"I..." he starts, doing his best to look confused. "I didn't really catch his—"

"Do you think we have time to waste on shit like this?!" the officer yells, hurrying Levi along. "Go then, and don't take all day with it. You'll join the landmine crew – they need more men."

"And where exactly is the prisoner—" Levi starts again, only to be interrupted by the officer.

"In the cellar!" he bellows, already walking away when Levi calls after him.

"And where are the landmine—"

"The southwest side of the camp! Stop wasting my time!"

The man's parting words make Levi sigh with relief as he tries to find his way through the house, guessing the cellar to be somewhere near the kitchen. He takes a few wrong turns, walking in on an officer sitting by the fireplace in one of the bedrooms with a pile of documents by his side, throwing them into the flames one slip of paper at a time. He tries to memorise the route though he doesn't know how he's supposed to get Erwin through the house without someone taking notice.

There's a soldier standing guard at the cellar door, a young man, barely in his twenties from what Levi can tell. He's wearing a perpetual frown when he watches the officer who's wrapping pieces of cloth around bottles of liquor before packing them up in a suitcase. He looks worried, and when Levi calls out to him he gives a noticeable start.

"Food for the prisoner," Levi merely says, adding, "and they told me to relieve you after."

"Who told you that?" the young man asks, his frown growing deeper; Levi swears in his mind.

"One of the officers, I didn't catch his name," he lies, reaching out his hand to pull open the cellar door; the man steps aside when he does. "Anyway, I better get on with it."

As he starts walking down the stairs Levi expects the young soldier to call after him, but instead he can hear the steady thumping of retreating footsteps. He continues, the mess kit still in his hands though he can barely feel it. The stairs turn sharply left toward the bottom, leaving the cellar itself hidden from view until Levi has reached the last five steps.

He finds Erwin lying on the cold earth floor, curled up next to a sack of potatoes, his hair falling over his eyes. Levi runs forward and drops the mess kit carelessly on the ground before kneeling down by Erwin's side; the stench of stale urine coming off him makes Levi gag and shudder.

"Erwin," he whispers, reaching for his right shoulder and shaking him. "Erwin, wake up. Are you...? Can you wake up?"

Levi's never known relief that could match how he feels when he hears that soft, low groan. It raises tears to his eyes, and he wipes them away quickly with the back of his hand.

"Erwin, wake up," Levi tries again. "We have to go, we can't stay here."

"Please," Erwin mumbles; Levi can barely understand the words. "Please, no more, I can't..."

Levi looks down at Erwin's face, only now noticing the sheen of sweat on his skin. He places his hand on the man's forehead, feeling his heart begin to race at the clammy heat of it. He swears under his breath, pressing his hand against Erwin's cheek and crouching down closer to him.

"Erwin," he calls out the man's name again, shaking him. "Erwin, you have to wake up. Erwin, I can't--"

"Levi..." Erwin whispers, but his eyes are still closed, his body still slack. "No, I won't tell them, they can't know..."

Levi looks over Erwin's body, takes in the right sleeve of his jacket where the fabric has turned dark and stiff; he's lost a lot of blood, and the fever must be a sign of infection. The realisation that Erwin won't be walking out of here makes Levi swear, his voice broken by a quiet sob.

Levi can feel time ticking away; it makes him feel frantic as he starts looking around himself, finding nothing but sacks of potatoes, nothing that he can use. Without knowing what else to do, Levi flings the rifle onto the floor and checks the handgun he took from the dead soldier: two rounds left. He swears again, pulling the strap off the rifle and securing it around his waist before getting to his feet and wrapping his arm around Erwin, hoisting the bulk of the man's body onto his shoulder.

"Come on now," Levi whispers, grunting as he fights to keep his legs from buckling under Erwin's weight. "Time to go."

"Stop right there!"

The gun is in Levi's hand before he can think to reach for it, pointed at the young soldier at the foot of the stairs. Levi can see the shaking of his hand from the way the barrel of his pistol moves; it follows Levi as he bends his knees to ease Erwin onto the floor.

"I'm just here to get my friend," Levi starts, keeping his voice steady and calm. "That's all I'm here for. No one needs to get hurt if you'll just let me—"

"You're a traitor!" the soldier tells him, taking a hesitant step forward. "Where'd you get that uniform? Did you kill someone?"

Levi can feel his brows drawing to a frown. "Listen," he starts, stopping to draw a breath. "The war is over. We've lost. You know it as well as I do. Why do you think they're running around like that upstairs? Like none of them knows what to do?"

The young man glances behind himself, his face etched with worry and confusion. "You don't know that," he finally mutters, his fingers flexing nervously around the handle of his gun.

"Yes, I do. And so do they," Levi replies, nodding toward the ceiling of the cellar. "I think you know it too."

"That's..." the soldier starts, tightening his grip on the gun, then loosening it. "Defeatism. You should get executed for that. I should—"

"Have you ever fired a gun?" Levi asks him now. "And I don't mean training. Have you ever fired at another person? Have you ever killed anyone?"

He watches as the hesitation grows on the soldier's face, watches the bead of sweat sliding down his forehead. "What do you know about it?" he demands in annoyance. "Who are you to tell me about it?"

"You don't have to know who I am. If you kill me, you'll never forget my face. You'll never forget what I sounded like. You'll never forget the last words I said to you," Levi whispers, thinking of the men he just killed, thinking of the ones guarding the MG, thinking of Krieger, of Osterhaus, of the nameless man in the parade, of the German soldier he killed by the river. "I haven't forgotten either. They'll be with me until the day I die."

The young man looks at Levi, biting his bottom lip and squeezing the handle of the gun. Levi watches him, how his gaze keeps bouncing around the room, stopping for a moment on Erwin. Levi can see how he hesitates, how the gun in his hand wavers for a second.

“My friend is a good man,” Levi goes on. “You don’t have to do this. You could just let us—”

“How do you think I could do that?” the soldier asks him, sounding desperate. “What do you think they’ll do to me if I let you go?”

“I don’t know what they’ll do,” Levi admits, “but what I do know is that this can only end in one of two ways: either you kill me or I’m getting my friend out of here. It’s up to you whether you’ll be alive to see us climbing up those stairs. From the way your hand is shaking I can tell the recoil will throw off your aim. When it comes to mine, I’m not sure my hand has ever been steadier than this.”

Levi can see the young man’s eyes shifting to the barrel of his gun as if to verify what Levi has said. His expression grows grim as fear floods his features; Levi can see the frantic rising and falling of his chest. He looks again at Erwin and starts biting his lip.

“All you have to do,” Levi says, “is make the choice you think you’ll regret the least. If you think you won’t regret killing me and my friend, take the shot.”

They can hear footsteps carrying in from above them. The sound makes the soldier nearly jump out of his skin.

“Hit me!” he suddenly hisses at Levi, his gun still pointed at him.

“What?”

“Hit me, knock me out!” the young man pleads, handing the pistol to Levi. “They’ll kill me if they think I let you escape! Just... take my gun, take what you need but please, don’t let them find me here like this!”

Levi reaches out and takes the gun, frowning as the man kneels down onto the floor.

“There’s a backdoor in the kitchen with a path that leads to the river,” he tells Levi in a hasty whisper. “The gate it passes through is guarded – two men, and they’re armed. You’ll need to—”

“I can take care of that,” Levi interrupts him, looking down at his upturned face. “Thank you. I don’t know—”

“Just do it,” the soldier tells him, closing his eyes and bracing himself for the impact; Levi tries his best to make the hit clean, relieved when the man falls onto the floor after a single blow to the back of his head.

Levi hoists Erwin’s arm back onto his shoulder, shifting his position until most of the man’s body is resting on his back. He takes the first step toward the stairs, his knees nearly buckling already, feeling the strain in his whole body as he manages to drag Erwin along with him.

“Levi...” the man whispers again; Levi can feel the warm puff of air against his ear.

“Come on now,” he whispers back. “I’m getting you out of this shit hole.”

Getting to the top of the stairs brings Levi’s body to its breaking point, makes his limbs break out in tremors, makes every minute that passes feel longer than the last. At the door he stops to listen and catch his breath, pushing into the kitchen after counting ten seconds of silence. He drags Erwin across the room, trying to sidestep the various things littering the floor: pots and pans, discarded clothes, shards of porcelain. He makes it through the door and steps out onto the little footpath leading away from the guest house, looking around himself at the soldiers scurrying across the yard and loitering by the building. He can feel their eyes on him, can see their confusion when he glances up and he wonders how it must look to them; a German soldier, one of them, carrying an unconscious officer on his back. They don’t approach him, don’t raise their voices, and Levi carries on, his feet slipping on the muddy ground.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

The shout rings out from behind him, but Levi doesn’t turn to look. He realises this is suicide, knows there is no way he’ll be able to get Erwin out of the camp alive, and he doesn’t understand how he didn’t see that before. He keeps walking, not even turning to look at the soldiers now, expecting the shot to sound out at any second. He can feel the heat of Erwin’s body against his back; the weight of him feels suddenly like safety, though Levi wishes he were Erwin’s shield, that things didn’t have to end like this, that Erwin didn’t have to protect him again like he’s done since the day they met.

“Where do you think you’re taking the prisoner?!”

Levi grits his teeth and pulls Erwin along, hearing another quiet grunt in his ear, trying to keep himself from wondering if it’s the last sound he’ll ever hear the man make.

“Stop right there!”

“Don’t worry, Erwin,” Levi whispers; from the corner of his eye he can see the soldiers starting to get to their feet and drift closer. “We’re almost there. We’re together now. It’ll be alright.”

Even the gunshot doesn’t make Levi stop. It’s a near miss, the bullet hits the ground by Levi’s left foot, but it doesn’t make him jump. All he feels is Erwin.

“It’s alright,” Levi breathes. “Everything will be alright. You’re not scared, are you, Erwin?”

A low whistling sound finally makes Levi’s steps falter. It comes from straight ahead, growing louder for mere seconds before the explosion shakes the ground. It throws Levi back, fills his world for a moment and makes his ears ring. He can taste dirt on his tongue and he spits out the mouldy flavour as he fights to get to his hands and knees, crawling over to Erwin’s body and clutching his arm. He can’t hear himself speaking the man’s name, can barely hear the second bomb when it hits the camp; he can feel the loose earth raining down

around him. Levi can see his hand shaking when he lifts it to Erwin's face, looking for those warm puffs of air, only breathing himself when he feels them against his skin.

He picks Erwin up again, legs nearly giving out under his own weight before he can even get the man resting against his back. Everything around him is chaos, a swirling sea of noise and motion with nothing to hold on to, so Levi clings to Erwin and to the task of moving forward, step by step. He can hear muffled screaming amid the dulled rumble of explosions, falls down when someone knocks against him but pushes back to his feet, feeling Erwin's words against the skin of his neck but hearing nothing of them.

"Just a little longer," Levi says, feeling the words in his throat and on his tongue but hearing nothing. "Northwest, no landmines, we'll be fine. Just need to get out of here..."

The gate stands unguarded when they reach it, the boom still lifted; Levi can see a handful of people running out ahead of him, sprinting into the woods toward the source of the bombs. Levi follows them slowly, the pain in his body raising tears to his eyes. He grits his teeth and pushes on, catching blurry glimpses of the soldiers on their way to surrender to whoever's attacking the camp. Under the shadow of the trees he stops for a moment to tie Erwin onto his back with the strap of the rifle. When Levi continues walking, he can feel his heart aching from the effort, can feel nausea burning his throat. He stops to retch but nothing comes up; afterward he feels twice as thirsty as he did before.

It takes a while for Levi to register the angry tapping sound of the machine guns and the steady shots of the rifles. When he looks back, he can't see the camp anymore, the trees have hidden it from view, and he wonders how far he's walked, how long a time has passed. The ground underneath him feels softer now, the forest all around him seems to be swaying in a gentle breeze though he can feel nothing of it on his face. When he looks down, he realises the path has disappeared, that his steps have strayed from it without him noticing. He can see the brown streak of it not far from where he stands, but with the way his legs are shaking, it might as well be a thousand metres away. Incapable of any thought that would pierce through his exhaustion, Levi lets his fingers release the strap from around his chest. He eases Erwin onto the forest floor and falls down beside him, watches his bruised face amid the budding spring and lets the world grow dark.

The violent drumming of the gunshots pierces through into Levi's dreams, keeps him half conscious and clutching the handgun, leaves him worrying for Erwin even in this state. Through the mist in his mind the birdsong around him signals safety, but when he feels someone nudging his side, he jumps up with the gun in hand, finger on the trigger, ready to kill. The world comes to view blurry and unfocused, but Levi sees enough to aim at the dark figures around him before he blinks away the sleep.

They've raised their guns at him, everyone in the front row of soldiers. Levi shifts his aim between them; for a moment their shouts come to his ears muffled and lazy, and it takes Levi another few seconds to realise why he can't understand the words they're saying. The green of their uniforms and the helmets on their heads grow foreign along with their speech. Levi stares down the barrel of a rifle, listening to the calming but unfriendly tone of the man behind it, and realises: he's the enemy now, a German man in a German soldier's clothes. He

glances down at Erwin, shuddering at the SS uniform for the first time in months; he already learned not to see it. The man is still unconscious, and Levi hisses a sob-laced swear under his breath. He starts to crouch down to shake the man by his shoulder, but the soldier in front of him gives an angry command and Levi stands still, nudging at Erwin with his foot instead.

“Wake up,” he hisses; the soldiers are shouting at each other and approaching. “Shit, Erwin, please...”

The man stays silent, and Levi finds no comfort in the steady rising and falling of his chest now. His gaze flies from soldier to soldier as he tries to think; the realisation that their survival is on him now, on his ability to talk his way out of this, feels like someone has poured cold water down his back. The man with the rifle is still speaking to him, the tone of his voice growing less and less patient. Realising two rounds would be enough for him and Erwin but useless for anything else, Levi raises his hands, signalling submission before throwing the handgun toward them; it lands in the grass and a soldier steps forward instantly to pick it up.

The man points the rifle toward Levi’s feet, repeating the motion a few times until Levi realises to get onto his knees. He can feel his heart hammering and his eyes keep shifting to Erwin, as if some part of him is still waiting for the miracle that would have him open his eyes. When one of the soldiers walks forward and kneels down by Erwin, Levi grits his teeth to stay still, but when the man grabs Erwin’s arm to lift him, Levi’s body moves against his reason. Before he knows what he’s done, his arm is wrapped around the man’s neck; he can hear the shouting of the soldiers around him, but doesn’t let go until a bullet whistles by his right ear: a warning shot.

The soldier struggles onto his feet, coughing and gagging and rubbing at his throat. Levi’s eyes move quickly from him to the man who has walked forward: older than most of the others, heavy-built with his hair more shaved than cut, he stares at Levi with his gun raised, never taking his eyes off him even when he gives an order, sending one of his men to leave the group. Levi startles himself with the hiss he lets out when the man steps closer; it stops him on his tracks and he asks the soldiers some questions, his expression growing grimmer by the answer. Levi can see his hold on the pistol tightening as he tries to peer around Levi to get a better look at Erwin.

The moment is broken when two soldiers push through to the front line and one of them salutes the older man; young and dark haired, with slim brows drawn to a frown over brown eyes. He exchanges a few words and nods with his commander before turning to Levi.

“Are you two from the camp?” he asks, his tone severe, the words short and to the point.

Levi blinks at the sudden change, at hearing words he can understand, before he can reply with a nervous, “No.”

“Is this your main force? Are there auxiliary camps nearby? Are you expecting backup forces?” the man goes on, and Levi shakes his head.

“I don’t know. We’re not soldiers,” he tries again, nodding at Erwin; he can feel the palms of his hands sweating. “My friend was held at the camp as a prisoner. I stole these clothes to get

him out of there. We're not soldiers."

The man's brows knit more tightly when he turns to his commander to report what Levi has said; the scoff and bark of an order he gets as replies seem like bad signs to Levi.

"My captain would like you to know we have ways to get you to talk," the soldier tells him when he speaks next, "but that he'd prefer not to—"

"I told you, we're not soldiers," Levi says again. "We've been fighting with the partisans, we had a camp some ten kilometres west from here until this morning."

The soldier translates the words, and the bits of laughter it raises from the crowd make Levi's blood run cold.

"All Germans are partisans at moments like this," the soldier tells Levi with an unfriendly smile.

"My friend's not German," Levi says, glancing again at Erwin, wishing him to wake. "He's English. He's been spying for—"

"We just need to know if this is your main force, if you have any auxiliary units nearby," the man interrupts Levi now. "You should just make this easier for yourself and stop wasting—"

"I don't know anything about any fucking units!" Levi snarls; the hands he's holding behind his head clench into fists. "I told you, we're partisans, not soldiers. I was barely in that camp for three hours, I don't know a fucking thing!"

The commander draws the man's attention with a question, listening to the explanation with apparent lack of interest, the only break being the little laugh he lets out when the man gestures toward Erwin. In the end he merely nods, calling out to the soldier still aiming the rifle at Levi; he hands the weapon to someone else and picks up the handgun Levi discarded instead; the metallic click makes Levi panic.

"I'm telling the truth!" he shouts at the commander. "If you wait, if my friend wakes up he'll tell you! He's English, he's... I'm a Jew. I'm not a soldier, I'm barely even German, I'm..."

When the man with the gun starts walking forward Levi turns to the interpreter.

"You have to tell him!" he pleads. "Neither one of us is a Nazi, I'm a Jew! My name is Levi Ackerman, they sent my uncle Kenny to a camp after Kristallnacht, I've been using false papers since before the war, please, you have to believe me, I can prove it!"

Levi watches as the man turns to his commander reluctantly, translating Levi's words in a hushed tone, as if fearing the man will take his impatience with Levi out on him instead. The soldier with the handgun halts on orders, stopping on his way to Levi's kneeling figure.

"How?" the translator asks Levi. "How could you prove it?"

Levi grits his teeth, thinks about the photograph but knows it's not enough, knows it's the only piece of paper he still carries with him.

“I’m circumcised,” he says, remembering the fear the thought has brought to him, how long he’s had to keep it hidden.

He can see the man’s gaze shifting onto his crotch for a second before he turns to his commander, his tone now even more hushed than before. Levi follows the situation as it develops, keeps watching the older man as he turns to someone else in the crowd with a question before barking an order and nodding toward Levi; it’s met with a sullen protest that makes the commander raise his voice, though he’s smiling. A young man steps out of the group of soldiers, glaring daggers behind himself as someone lets out a low whistle.

“You say you can prove it, so prove it,” the soldier tells Levi in German. “Goldstein’s Jewish, he should be able to tell.”

Levi nods, getting to his feet, frowning as the soldier with the handgun walks forward too.

“You can do it behind those trees there, so you’ll have a bit of privacy,” the soldier explains. “Fowler’s our best shot. He’s coming along to make sure you won’t run or do anything stupid.”

Levi casts a wary glance at Fowler, but nods again, walking between the men over to the cover of the foliage. The two keep up a quiet conversation, and from their tones Levi thinks Fowler’s teasing Goldstein who replies in curses and exasperated sighs. When they finally stop, the cool touch of metal against the back of his head makes Levi stand still. He looks up at Goldstein who’s standing in front of him, gritting his teeth as he follows the man’s vague gestures and pulls down his pants. It reminds him of the previous times, the two men at the Gestapo headquarters, the way he had to expose himself in front of Darlett, but before the memories can fully take hold, Goldstein has already straightened his back and nodded, muttering a few confirming words to his brother-in-arms. Levi can feel the touch of the gun disappearing and pulls back when Fowler steps forward to peer over his shoulder at his front, turning to Goldstein with a question. The reply he gets sounds annoyed to Levi’s ears, but when Goldstein turns back to him, he does so with a reassuring smile.

A sudden eruption of angry shouts sends Levi’s hands to pull up the trousers and he follows Goldstein and Fowler back to the others in a run. They’ve all reached for their weapons again, standing in a semi-circle and aiming at Erwin; he’s struggling to sit up, Levi can tell from the way he tries to lean on to his right arm, but he’s managed to clutch one of the soldiers in a choke hold. Beyond the anxiety the situation brings, seeing Erwin alive and awake fills Levi with relief, fills his lungs with fresh air, fills his eyes with tears. Levi can hear Erwin shouting, asking the men what they’ve done with him, calling out his name, and he steps forward warily between Erwin and the guns.

“Oi,” he says, walking toward the man. “Stop making that racket. I’m right here.”

Erwin sees him and his grip on the soldier grows slack; the man is able to wriggle his way out, gagging and coughing. Levi takes a few more steps forward, giving in to the way Erwin clutches his arm, to the way he yanks him down, to the way he twists his fingers into Levi’s hair and pulls him hard against his shoulder. Levi can feel panting breaths, can hear the dry sobs, but he doesn’t know if they’re his own or Erwin’s. Under his hands the man feels warm, still burning with the fever, but so real, so solid, so safe.

“Why did you do that, Levi?” Erwin asks him, his voice hoarse, his grip on Levi’s hair growing tighter. “How could you be so stupid? I asked you not to be careless, I told you not to.”

“Are you a fucking idiot?” Levi asks him back, letting out a chortling laugh as he presses his forehead more forcefully against Erwin’s body. “You think I’m going to leave you there? You think I care what happens to me?”

“Oh, Levi,” Erwin breathes, and Levi still can’t tell if he’s really angry when they turn to look at each other. “Don’t you ever do something like that again. Promise me. Don’t ever—”

“I’m not making a shitty promise like that,” Levi tells him instantly. “If you don’t want me saving your life, you should take better care of it yourself.”

At this Erwin laughs, closing his eyes as he presses his forehead against Levi’s. “Thank you,” he whispers. “Thank you, Levi. I can’t ever thank you enough.”

“You should give them some credit too,” Levi says, nodding toward the foreign soldiers. “They were good enough not to give us both a couple new holes to shit through.”

Erwin chuckles again and Levi moves to sit beside him, brushing the grass and dirt off his uniform jacket while he exchanges a few words with the commander. In the end they shake hands – Erwin offering his left makes Levi wonder whether his right arm is worse off than he thought. He doesn’t speak up until Erwin nods a confirmation to something and starts getting to his feet.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Levi asks him, getting up as well. “What did he ask? What did you tell him?”

“They can arrange transportation for us that will take us to their camp,” Erwin explains; Levi looks at the beads of sweat gathering onto his forehead and grits his teeth. “The transport isn’t far. I can wal—”

“No,” Levi states at once, looking around himself until he spots the dark-haired soldier who translated his words before. “Oi, you. Tell your friends to start building a stretcher.”

“Levi, I’m perfectly fine to—”

“No,” Levi tells him again, barely giving him a glance as he frowns at the interpreter. “Didn’t you hear me? He needs a stretcher! He’s injured! Get moving.”

The soldier’s eyes shift from Levi to Erwin before he starts looking around for his captain, but when he finds no one who would give him any orders to the contrary, he calls out for a few men and they walk out into the forest. Levi helps Erwin back down on the ground and runs his hand gently over the man’s arm; even this soft touch makes Erwin wince. Levi tries to peel back the bloodstained sleeve, but soon finds it’d be easier for him to cut it off instead.

“What happened?” he asks Erwin in a hushed tone.

“I got hit,” Erwin tells him, drawing a sharp breath when Levi’s fingers trace his elbow. “The bullet’s still in there, I think. The arm’s broken, they—”

Erwin stops and grunts as Levi runs his hand higher, feeling the sharp edge of a bone through the uniform. He grits his teeth against the thought of the pain Erwin must be in, how much worse it will be once the adrenaline wears off. There’s nothing they can do about it now with no supplies and not much time, but Levi uses the strap of the rifle to tie the arm against Erwin’s body to keep it still. By the time the stretcher is ready, Erwin’s fever has worsened again; it makes him break out in shivers despite how warm the day is, and when they lift him the pain makes him whimper. Levi can barely take his eyes off Erwin long enough to face the captain and the dark-haired soldier when they approach him.

“I’ve been ordered to accompany you,” the soldier tells him. “I’m private Schultz. Anything you have to say to anyone, you can say through me.”

Levi nods and shakes the man’s hand, looking up at the captain when he starts to speak.

“He’d like you to know that once we get to the camp, someone there should be able to arrange for Major Smith to be reunited with his own people.”

Levi nods again though more hesitantly, glancing at Erwin and remembering what he said on the steps of the cottage. He knows they have no choice but to go along with the plan; Nifa’s skilled enough, but Levi suspects she doesn’t have the knowledge or equipment to treat Erwin’s arm.

“You should tell your captain that the Germans have laid landmines around the camp,” Levi says, suddenly remembering. “They’ve covered the southwest side at least. I’m not sure if there’s more of them around. I took the northwest route out and I made it at least, so that ought to be safe.”

Schultz relays the message to the captain, who shakes Levi’s hand briefly before they set out in different directions, Levi and Erwin accompanied by Schultz, Goldstein and Fowler and another soldier Levi doesn’t know the name of. They tread through the forest slowly, the foreigners taking turns carrying Erwin while Levi walks beside the stretcher, growing worried again as Erwin falls quiet, his eyes closed and his face pale. He catches fresh blood dripping down the man’s hand and they stop long enough for Levi to tie a tourniquet above his elbow; the pain makes him stir from his sleep with a low grunt, but he doesn’t open his eyes. Levi strays from the path for a moment to get the duffel bag from the ditch where he left it; the fear that Erwin might wake to find him gone makes him run back. By the time they reach the transport truck, a sheen of sweat lies over Erwin’s features again, and Levi can hear him muttering something through the haze of his slumber.

They climb on board with effort, Levi doubling over as he walks to the back of the covered space and sits down cross-legged, taking Erwin’s head onto his lap when they ease him off the stretcher. He feels the man’s forehead, brows drawing to a frown at the clammy heat of his skin, the eye that’s swollen shut, the bloody cut on his lip. In the confined space he starts to smell it again, the stench of stale piss that wafts up from Erwin’s body. Levi tries not to think about Erwin in the cellar, being beaten and pissed on but the images come regardless, making him clench his jaw.

“Is he alright?” Schultz asks him, looking worried when Levi doesn’t nod.

“He has a fever,” Levi tells him quietly not to wake Erwin, only raising his voice when the truck’s engine starts. “He needs a doctor for his arm.”

“There’ll be someone at the camp who can help him,” Schultz lets him know, “and once you’ll move on to the British-occupied parts, I’m sure they’ll help him with whatever he needs.”

Levi nods without smiling. Next to Schultz Fowler speaks up; Levi catches him nodding toward them almost excitedly.

“What did he say?” Levi asks Schultz who lets out a sheepish laugh.

“He thinks it’s wonderful,” the man says, “how you’re taking care of your friend.”

Levi stares at Schultz for a moment before turning back to Erwin, gazing down at his face, running his fingers gently into his hair to comb it into place. “He means everything to me,” he says softly. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him.”

Levi can sense their gazes on them when Schultz translates his words but he doesn’t look up from Erwin’s face, bringing his own close to it when some secret pain makes the man moan and draw his thick brows to a sudden frown. Levi whispers into his ear words he hopes are calming: I’m here, it’s all going to be all right, just a little longer and they’ll fix you up, don’t worry. Levi’s fingers keep tracing circles in Erwin’s hair even when he leans his back against the truck, swaying whenever it hits bumps on the makeshift road. Despite the roughness of the travel, the droning roar of the engine lulls Levi into a restless sleep, from which he doesn’t wake until a sudden silence rouses him.

Levi stumbles out of the truck, following Fowler and Goldstein as they lift Erwin out on the stretcher. They start to carry him through the camp, taking quick, heavy steps that nearly make Levi fall behind. He catches the badly concealed curiosity from the men they pass; it’s mingled here and there with open hostility, reminding Levi again of his and Erwin’s uniforms. No one challenges what they’re doing nor approaches them until they’re stopped at the entrance of the sick tent by a man nearly as tall as Mike who looks at both Levi and Erwin as if they were bringing in the plague. Even when Schultz explains the situation, it seems to Levi he lets them pass grudgingly, walking into the tent behind them.

They find the doctor – a thin, wiry man with round glasses and bloodstains up to his elbows, and Levi doesn’t like the look of him. He doesn’t ask about who they are, doesn’t seem to give their uniforms so much as a passing glance, merely tells Goldstein and Fowler to move Erwin from the stretcher onto a table. Before Levi has managed to push through the people, the doctor has cut through the sleeve of Erwin’s uniform and pulled it off before retying the tourniquet. Levi watches him as he examines the small round wound, feeling the broken bone under his skin. He shakes his head sharply after inspecting Erwin’s arm and hand for a moment, saying something to the tall man that sends him away. Levi frowns, looking around to find Schultz but before he spots him across the room, the tall man has reappeared and started handing out supplies to the doctor: clamps, a blade, a saw.

“Wait a second,” Levi snaps, grabbing a hold of the doctor’s arm. “You’re not going to—”

The doctor starts speaking over him and someone grabs his shoulder, pulling him away from the table and Erwin. Levi frees himself with force, looking around for Schultz and crossing the small distance between himself and the man in a run.

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” he says, hearing the desperation in his own voice. “It looks like they’re going to... I don’t know what—”

Schultz walks past him and exchanges a few words with the doctor before turning back to Levi. “He says there’s too much nerve damage. He has to amputate.”

A swirling panic fills Levi, fractures and scatters his mind. He watches as the doctor injects Erwin with something, his feelings suddenly distant, the whole world growing quiet and slow for a fleeting moment.

“He’s right handed,” Levi mutters, looking down at his own. “Erwin, he uses his right hand.”

Levi is only vaguely aware of the sympathetic nod Schultz gives him. “You should go rest. I can take you somewhere where you can wait until they’re—”

“No,” Levi says at once, shaking his head and taking a step forward. “I’m not leaving him.”

He walks back to the table, fixing the doctor’s narrowed eyes with a determined glare that makes the man sigh and gesture with his hands for Levi to hold Erwin down. Levi leans onto his body, bringing his lips to his ear to whisper words of comfort. He doesn’t want to see the blade in the doctor’s hand, doesn’t want to see him cut into Erwin’s flesh, but there’s no escaping the moment he does it. Erwin wakes and tries to sit up, the strength of his body almost too much for Levi.

“It’s alright,” Levi tries to let Erwin know though it’s clear he doesn’t hear Levi and doesn’t care about the lies he’s telling. “Calm down, I’m right here, I’m—”

The doctor shouts out something and Levi sees new pairs of hands reaching out for Erwin, pushing him back onto the table as he starts throwing his weight against Levi. He screams and growls at them through gritted teeth, tries to swing his fist at Levi but someone grabs his arm before the hit lands. The doctor doesn’t look up from his work, simply cuts away at Erwin with his eyes narrowed, letting out a long sigh once Erwin’s shouting finally ceases, his body growing slack and unmoving.

“He’s only fainted,” Schultz tells Levi. “Nothing to worry about. It’s—”

“I know,” Levi tells the man without looking at him, taking Erwin’s hand in his. “Thank you.”

He can sense the others leaving but doesn’t turn to make sure. On the other side of the table the doctor puts away the blade and extends his hand into which the tall man passes the saw. Levi looks away when he starts; the sounds and the rhythmic swaying of Erwin’s body are enough. He brushes his hand against Erwin’s cheek, catching the tears he’s cried onto his

sleeve but closing his eyes when the sound of the saw stops. When he opens them again the arm is gone.

Levi doesn't know how long it takes the doctor to finish what he's started; he only glances at him now and again to see him still working with his needle and thread, or when the sudden smell of burning flesh wafts up and makes him shudder. When the doctor is done he stands up, leaving the tall man in charge of dressing the wound while he stretches his back and yawns, rushing along after giving Levi a curt nod which he answers in kind. Once the bandages are in place, the tall man turns to Schultz who skulks out of the shadows behind Levi.

"He says he needs to get your friend clean," Schultz translates. "You can wait outside while he—"

"No," Levi says, shaking his head. "I'll do it. He can help if he wants."

They argue about it for a moment but Levi stands his ground, running a washcloth over Erwin's body, aching from the memories the act evokes; the bathroom in Erwin's apartment, how the man combed through Levi's hair, how they found a way to comfort each other through the warm water, the soft touches, the scent of the lavender soap which Levi had nearly forgotten. They work in silence; the tall man doesn't speak until they're done.

"He says we need to get you boys some new clothes," Schultz explains. "You'll stick out like a sore thumb otherwise."

Levi nods, accepting the offered opportunity to wash himself, dressing up in a clean uniform when it's presented; it's the wrong size, he needs to roll up the sleeves and the pant legs, but something about it feels better if not any less foreign. He helps the tall man dress Erwin, follows along as they move him over to a bed in a room full of soldiers, offering Levi a crude little chair once they realise he's not going to leave.

"You should get some sleep," Schultz tells him quietly; there's another soldier in a bed next to Erwin's, sleeping. "When was the last time you ate something?"

Levi frowns, remembering the cold, humble breakfast of bread and cheese he had with Nanaba. "This morning," he says, uttering a quiet laugh; the thought is absurd.

Schultz shakes his head before taking his leave, returning with a mess kit: hot soup and a slice of buttered bread and an enamel mug full of hot tea. Levi wolfs it down before falling asleep, sitting on the floor with his back against the frame of the bed; Schultz brings him a blanket sometime before midnight. All through the night Erwin doesn't stir from his sleep, doesn't open his eyes until a medic is halfway done changing his bandages in the morning. He jumps at the touch, turning his eyes on Levi only when he speaks.

"Steady now," Levi tells him quietly. "You'll get your dressings in a twist."

He watches Erwin as he turns to look at the stump of his arm, his eyes darkening and his brows drawing to a frown. The laughter that escapes his lips is hollow and full of bitterness.

“And here I was thinking it was all a bad dream,” he mutters, glancing at Levi before turning away. “I suppose there was nothing else to be done about it.”

“Too much nerve damage,” Levi explains quietly. “That’s what the doctor said, anyway. How are you feeling?”

“I have been better, Levi,” Erwin says and sighs. “But then, I suppose I have been worse.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Levi tries, though he knows if he was told that in Erwin’s place, he’d be likely to attempt his first left-handed chokehold.

“I won’t be a soldier anymore.”

“Good,” Levi decides firmly, drawing his chair closer to the bed. “No one should make a living doing shit like this anyway. You’ll find something else, something better that won’t kill you.”

Erwin laughs again, but this time the sound is different, warmer and kind. He turns to look at Levi, eyes still distant for a moment before he’s fully returned.

“You saved my life, Levi,” he whispers, his voice hoarse and low. “I don’t know how—”

“You shouldn’t worry about it,” Levi interrupts the man before he can start with the gratitude he’ll find unbearable. “I just did what you would’ve done, that’s all. Anyway, it doesn’t even come close to what you’ve done for me so just leave it.”

Levi catches the smile on Erwin’s lips when he glances up at the man, who seems to think it best not to try and thank him further. Levi fetches them both some breakfast, setting Erwin at once to work on his left hand and having him eat the porridge himself rather than feeding him. The doctor nods him his approval when he comes by to inject Erwin with whatever he got before – morphine, Levi guesses, though he doesn’t ask.

“You’ve still got a fever,” Levi whispers once the food is gone, pressing his hand against Erwin’s forehead. “You should sleep some more, get your strength up.”

For the first day of being bedridden, Erwin is more obedient than ever before, following Levi’s orders as if Levi knows what he’s talking about. He rests and eats and lets Levi help him with the chamber pot, though Levi can tell it makes him feel uncomfortable. By the second day, he starts talking with the soldiers in the beds by his; at night he tells Levi how strange it feels to speak his own language again and to hear people using it in their answers.

They stay in the camp for a total of four days, as far as Levi can count them. They blend into each other, progressing in the rhythm of Erwin’s recovery. Levi sleeps and eats when he does, waits patiently by his bedside, keeps helping with whatever he needs, uses Erwin’s assistance to ask the medics about his condition, about how the wound is healing, of whether he needs more rest or food. Erwin tells him not to fuss but Levi’s exasperation is enough to shut him up.

Erwin makes friends quickly with the men who treat him and the men who lie in their beds like he does, waiting with little to keep them occupied. They like him, Levi can tell from the smiles on their faces, though they vanish quickly enough once they turn their eyes on him. His continuous presence is a mystery to them, until Erwin makes the mistake of telling a few of them of how Levi saved him from the Germans – a story Levi himself told Erwin, though the man must have added details to make the whole affair more interesting. After that they flock to his bedside, gawking at Levi and asking to shake his hand, having Erwin translate the tale as Levi tells it over and over again.

“No fucking manners,” Levi mutters one evening when a group of five soldiers walks out of the tent, still chatting excitedly. “Don’t they know you need your rest?”

“They give me something else to think about,” Erwin tells him quietly and smiles. “I’m sure they need it just as badly as I do.”

Levi snorts but doesn’t speak, letting the soldiers gather around Erwin even when they’re getting on the truck; it transports them to a small town Levi doesn’t care to learn the name of. As they drive through it, Levi watches the half-collapsed buildings, squinting at the posters that advise the civilian population to gather their belongings and leave. He can see soldiers walking around, even catches an officer’s peaked cap here and there. Next to him Erwin has fallen asleep, and he wakes him gently when the truck finally stops by a large building in the town’s outskirts.

It has housed a hospital, and the British have kept it as such, moving their soldiers into the beds once occupied by the town’s inhabitants. Levi listens absently at the conversation Erwin has with an officer, not understanding the words and picking up little from the tones of their voices; everything they say sounds formal and polite. They walk through the main ward past two dozen soldiers, walking up a flight of stairs and entering a smaller room; Levi counts five men in their respective beds, spotting the one still empty and guiding Erwin to it to the obvious distress of the young woman who greeted them along with the officer.

“You should tell her not to hover like that,” Levi mutters to Erwin, nodding toward the woman who has stayed by the bedside, wringing her hands as Levi pulls the covers on Erwin.

“She just wants to do her job.”

“She’s making me nervous,” Levi counters in a whisper, adjusting Erwin’s pillows. “I don’t want anyone else taking care of you.”

“And I don’t want you to exhaust yourself,” Erwin tells him firmly. “You should let her help. Perhaps you’d get to sleep lying down for a change.”

Levi scoffs. “Do you suppose they’d bring me an extra blanket to sleep on if I asked nicely?” he says, raising a thoughtful expression on Erwin’s face.

“Only one way to find out,” the man says before turning to the nurse and passing on the question; she looks more than a little uncertain but heads out anyway, returning after a while with an older, very matronly woman who seems much less impressed with Erwin’s question.

“What are they saying?” Levi asks Erwin after a while, waiting patiently for the man to turn to face him again.

“They were wondering if you wouldn’t be more comfortable sleeping somewhere—”

“No,” Levi says at once, shaking his head. “I’m sleeping right here – on the floor if I have to.”

Erwin sighs and negotiates a while longer with the older woman who finally gives in, looking more than a little irritated and casting wary glances at the other men in the room when two soldiers carry in a small maid’s bed; its legs are so short it only reaches halfway up Erwin’s, but Levi is more than grateful for it, even giving the older woman an appreciative nod when she leaves the room. The younger one brings in bandages and other supplies on a tray, approaching Erwin’s bed with caution and sighing wearily when Levi walks around it to her.

“Tell her I want to learn how to take care of you,” Levi tells Erwin who sighs as well but passes on Levi’s words; he understands enough from the way the young woman shakes her head.

“She says she doesn’t have the time to teach you.”

“Tell her she’ll save time in the long run,” Levi tries now. “She’ll only need to show me once and I can do it every time after that.”

After some convincing, the woman finally draws up a chair and sits down, taking Levi through checking and cleaning the wound and changing the bandages. He presses each stage into his mind, watching intently as she injects Erwin with more morphine before moving on to her next patient. Before she leaves she says her name is Petra, and that they shouldn’t hesitate to ask her for anything they might need.

“You shouldn’t have to take care of me, Levi,” Erwin whispers when they’re by themselves again. “I don’t want you to turn into my nurse.”

Levi scoffs. “It’s no different to helping you bathe or get dressed,” he says, spreading the resin salve onto the bruises on Erwin’s face. “I did that before, remember? This isn’t anything new.”

“I think we both know that’s not true.”

Levi’s hands falter and his gaze sinks onto the covers of the bed. Suddenly he feels tired, as if the very air in the room is near impossible to breathe. He can feel them pushing through, all the thoughts he’s had to leave behind, all the feelings that can’t have their time now, not when he needs to be strong for Erwin. Levi tightens his grip around the salve tin and looks up, meeting Erwin’s eyes for what feels like the first time in days.

“Listen,” he whispers, his brows drawing to a frown. “You didn’t spend ten years pretending to be a Nazi just to get crushed by something like this. You’re stronger than that. You’ll get your head around it, and you’ll move on. I know you will.”

“Levi, this isn’t–” Erwin starts, but Levi cuts him short.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” he says, spreading more salve onto the cut on Erwin’s eyebrow. “But so was Holtz, wasn’t he? At least you’re free of him now, and for good.”

Erwin looks as though he’s about to protest but in the end he says nothing, merely quietly thanks Levi when he finally puts the tin of salve on the nightstand and gets up to draw a curtain around the bed, stopping it at the foot of his own so he’ll still be able to see the man throughout the night. They both lie down without talking; Levi listens to the quiet moaning and snoring in the half-darkness until Erwin’s mixes with the others’, and he falls asleep.

He wakes up with a start, gasping for breath, his muffled coughs piercing the silence as he struggles out of bed and into the long hallway, his hands grasping at the railing as he runs down the stairs, finally pushing his way through the doors and out of the building. He fills his lungs with the cool night air and succumbs to a coughing fit that forces him to sit down on a cold stone step. He lifts his hand to his chest, trying in vain to rub away the ache and to ease his laboured breathing. He starts to feel better, but slowly, looking out across the open yard as far as he can see; the darkness ahead is hardly a match to the one in his head.

Levi hasn’t thought about it, hasn’t given himself permission, and still he’s been aware of it existing somewhere in the walled-off areas of his mind: a dream, absurd and stupid but something to hold on to in all of this, something that has now disappeared. He tries to think back and figure out when he first thought of it, in the partisan camp, during their journey west, at the cottage... Perhaps even as early as when they spent the weekend there, just him and Erwin. In theory it wasn’t so ridiculous – there really is no better time to disappear than now when hundreds of thousands of men are dying and taken captive, vanishing without a trace. They could have been among those men, taken refuge somewhere in the wild, lived off whatever they could. It would’ve been a hard life but they would’ve been together, and Levi knows even now there’s nothing he wouldn’t give up for that. If Erwin hadn’t lost his arm Levi might have brought it up, stupid as it was, but now... Well, if that life would’ve been hard before, with one of them injured it would be nigh impossible.

Levi rubs harder at his chest, not sure anymore what is causing the ache. He straightens his back and tries to draw deeper breaths, jumping when someone places a hand gently on his shoulder: the nurse from before. She nods for Levi to follow her inside, sitting him down onto a chair in a room fitted with a table and a few chairs, cupboards and a small stove in the corner. She grabs a stethoscope and presses it first against Levi chest and then his back, signalling for him to take deep breaths; the frown on her face tells Levi she’s not pleased with what she hears. She fetches a doctor who does what she did before turning to Levi, speaking to him in broken German, asking him if he’s been near explosions recently.

“Four, five days ago,” Levi replies slowly, buttoning up his shirt. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“It’s called blast lung,” the doctor explains. “We need more tests of you, but it’s not very bad.”

“Is that why I’m coughing?” Levi asks now. “Why it’s difficult to breathe?”

The man nods. "I'm sorry," he says, stopping to find the right words. "It won't be very bad, but you can't do hard work."

They take an x-ray of his chest, but it doesn't make the doctor look more worried. From what he manages to explain to Levi, he's not in any danger, and Levi decides to keep it all from Erwin when he crawls back to bed that night. When the man asks him about his cough the following day, Levi tells him he must have caught a cold, and Erwin doesn't press the matter. When Petra looks like she's about to speak about it, Levi shoots her a warning glare and she falls quiet, turning to inject Erwin with more morphine instead.

"Ask her why she's giving you so much less of it today," Levi tells Erwin who relays the message.

"Their supplies are running low," he says to Levi. "They need to ration it, and even so they'll most likely run out by the end of the day."

"Can't they get more of it?" Levi demands heatedly, wrapping the stump of Erwin's arm into fresh bandages. "You'll be in pain. They should do something about that."

"Everyone here will be in pain," Erwin reminds him but Levi merely snorts.

"You think I care about everyone here?" he asks the man who lets out a puff of laughter.

"I'll manage, Levi," Erwin tells him gently before thanking Petra with a smile.

They spend the day resting, both lying on their respective beds and talking quietly until they run out of things to say. Levi listens lazily as Erwin strikes up conversations with his fellow officers, guessing from his strained expression he's doing it more to take his mind off of something else than because he's in the mood to talk. The rest of them have been able to keep their limbs, and Levi notices Erwin's eyes shifting more frequently now to the stump that he's all but ignored until now. The drop of morphine Petra brings in the evening isn't enough to even take the edge off; Levi can tell from the way Erwin grits his teeth and nods at the woman without saying a word. By the time they dim the lights, the room has grown full of the sounds of discomfort and pain. Levi sits by Erwin's side, coughing into his sleeve and wiping off the sweat as it rises to the man's forehead. He's clutching the sheets with his remaining hand, knuckles white from the effort as he fights to keep still and quiet, and fails.

"I can't take it anymore, Levi," Erwin finally huffs, the words pushing out through gritted teeth. "I need a distraction, something, anything else to focus on that this."

Levi feels anguished, looking around himself as if somehow he'll be able to spot something in the dark that wasn't there before: a book, a deck of cards, a record player.

"There's nothing," Levi mutters hurriedly. "I don't know what—"

"Please," Erwin interrupts him, his voice so pleading it makes Levi ache. "Please, Levi. Make me feel something else."

He clutches Levi's arm and pulls him closer, spreading his legs to make room for him and Levi understands. He looks down at Erwin and bites his lip, feeling a shudder shooting down his spine.

"Erwin," he whispers. "I'm not sure I'll—"

"Please," Erwin moans again, his hand coming up to pull on Levi's hair. "I need this, Levi. I wouldn't ask you if I didn't."

It doesn't feel right, the wet heat of Erwin's mouth around his cock, the way he grows harder from the touch – he barely understands how he's able to. Levi keeps his gaze on Erwin's face, tries to mimic the man's focus, but the white of the bandages around his stump keeps catching his eye, reminding him constantly what it's all for, reminding him of how less than a fortnight ago he was using Erwin in the same way, to distract himself, to keep his mind occupied, to keep himself blind to the pain if even for a quarter hour. Levi closes his eyes and fills his head with the pleasure Erwin's giving him, the deftness of his tongue, the pressure of his lips, and imagines they're back at the cottage before Dresden burned, before the fire and hurt and death. When he's ready he pulls away, running a thumb over Erwin's lips; the pain is gone now, his eyes are bright, his cheeks flushed, his face expectant as Levi unbuttons his trousers and pulls them down, spreading spittle between Erwin's buttocks before guiding him onto his side.

The man's half-hearted erection dies as Levi pushes in, trying to be as gentle as he can but knowing how it must feel. He takes his time, the physical sensation making him harder though his mind resists, knowing that pain can sometimes heal pain but hating himself for how it looks on Erwin's face. Still he forces the intrusion, urged on by Erwin's whispered encouragements, holding on to the man's thigh to keep himself steady. Levi fights against the peak of his pleasure, buying seconds for Erwin by gritting his teeth against it, by chastising himself in the silence of his mind, and when he crashes over the feeling is purely physical, it leaves all the dark corners of Levi's mind untouched. He kisses Erwin's body wherever he can reach, presses his forehead against the man's arm as he starts to cough, pushes against the weight of his hand as it comes to rest on his head.

When he's caught his breath, Levi helps Erwin wash up, leaving the room to do the same, coughing as he walks to the washroom. He returns to find the man has lain down on the bed with his back toward the door and his knees drawn up to his chest. Levi can smell the chamber pot from the hallway and empties and washes it quickly before joining Erwin in the bed, wrapping his arm around the man's waist as he shuffles closer. He can't hear a thing, but he feels Erwin crying in the way his body shudders. Levi presses his forehead against the man's back, closing his eyes and swallowing back the words he knows won't be a comfort now.

It takes days for the worst of the pain to ease, days during which Levi doesn't leave Erwin's side for longer than a visit to the bathroom. Petra brings them their food and fixes Erwin's bandages whenever Levi's not had the heart to make them tight enough. Erwin still sleeps during the day, leaving Levi with time to wander about the hospital and its garden; the days are getting warmer and the first of the flowers are starting to push through the rich dark earth.

Levi often sits on a bench and looks at them, letting his mind get used to the thought of spring, of survival, of the inevitable task of having to live out what's rest of his life now that he hasn't died.

The days flow by slowly, almost too similar for Levi to tell them apart. He starts to grow restless again with Erwin needing more rest than any other remedy Levi could help him with, and he spends his time playing klondike on his bed, growing tired of avoiding people – the few times someone tried to start a conversation with him were awkward enough. He's just about to settle grudgingly down for a nap when a score of footsteps approaches the room and forces him to sit up. A group of five men enters and Levi greets them with a frown as they walk up to Erwin's bed. They're mostly old, all wearing uniforms with peaked caps tucked under their arms, and the way they look at him makes Levi grow sullen.

"We were told this is where we could find Major Smith," one of them tells Levi, stepping forward. "We have an urgent need to–"

"Keep your voice down," Levi interrupts him, turning back to his cards. "He's sleeping. You'll have to come back later."

The man's momentary silence feels stunned and full of disbelief, though Levi doesn't look up from his game.

"Excuse me, *sir*, perhaps I didn't make myself–"

"I heard you just fine," Levi tells him now, glaring at him for a moment before flipping one of his cards. "Seems to me it's you who should get his ears checked. I told you, he is sleeping. Come back later."

After they've whispered amongst themselves for a while, the men take their leave. To Levi's dismay they've taken his advice and return a few hours later when he and Erwin are having their dinner with Levi sitting cross-legged at the foot of Erwin's bed. The man greets them with a clumsy left-handed salute that the oldest of the men dismisses almost at once. Levi scowls at them as they draw up chairs around the bed, gathering up his and Erwin's dishes after fluffing up the man's pillows.

"I think you should step outside, Levi," Erwin tells him. "It's likely this will take a while, and I won't be able to translate any of it just now."

"Do you know what they're after?" Levi asks him in a whisper. "I don't like the look of them."

Erwin utters a quiet laugh. "I'm sure I'll find out soon enough," he says, running his hand over Levi's in passing as he takes his leave, casting one more apprehensive glance behind himself at the door.

They talk for hours; Levi has the time to come by and see if they're gone three times before they've actually vanished from Erwin's bedside. He reclaims his previous place, carrying in a small bowl of porridge for each of them, trying to study Erwin's features for a sign of what the officers wanted with him, but when it reveals nothing, he finally asks the question.

“They were curious about what has happened to me since I failed to make contact with them following my final mission,” Erwin explains, flashing Levi a quick smile that doesn’t make him feel any less uneasy.

“What did you tell them?”

“That there was a problem with the exit strategy,” Erwin says, “and I had to improvise from there.”

Levi nods, eating a spoonful of porridge and lowering his voice to ask, “You think they believed you?”

“For now, there’s no reason for them not to,” Erwin mutters back, giving Levi another quick smile. “There’s nothing to worry about, Levi.”

“If you say so,” he replies, pushing his spoon into Erwin’s porridge and stirring to cool it down.

“They told me Hitler is dead,” the man suddenly speaks again; the words stop the movement of Levi’s hand and he looks up in surprise. “Apparently he killed himself in his bunker in Berlin.”

Levi thinks back to the pictures of the man he used to see around every corner, the hateful voice on the radio, the “Heil Hitler” that fell from everyone’s lips at every turn. He imagines the gun in the man’s hand, pictures him pulling the trigger, the mess of the insides of his vile brain splattering across the floor.

“No wonder it’s easier to breathe around here,” Levi mutters, turning back to his porridge as Erwin clears his throat.

“Yes, about that,” he says, catching Levi’s gaze and fixing it with his own. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you’ve had problems with that lately.”

“It’s nothing,” Levi counters at once. “Just a few bruises on my lungs from the explosion. I’ll live.”

“Levi—”

“The doctor’s already looked at them,” he interrupts Erwin. “He says there’s nothing to worry about. I’ll just need to avoid doing any heavy lifting, that’s all.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Erwin asks him, sounding stern.

“You have enough on your plate,” Levi explains curtly, nodding toward the stump though he hardly needs to. “Anyway, it’s nothing, like I said. Why would I trouble you with something like that?”

Erwin sighs, laying down his spoon. “Nothing concerning you is a small matter to me, Levi,” he whispers. “I would appreciate it if you remembered that in the future.”

Levi feels shame burning his cheeks and doesn't look up at Erwin, preferring to keep his eyes on his plate of food instead. For the next few days Levi tries to match the softness of Erwin's words with how he cares for him, learning away from the routine that redressing his wound has become and doing it instead as if it were his first time, with all the attention and focus he can muster.

It happens unexpectedly some days later when Levi is shaving Erwin's face, sitting in the space between his thighs as he runs the razor over his cheeks, clearing away the messy stubble that has sprouted onto his features. A nurse enters the room in a run, her cheeks flushed as she stops to draw a breath before saying something that makes the men sit up in their beds, all confusion and smiles as they look around at each other.

"What's happened?" Levi asks Erwin, glancing at the officers who have started to shake each other's hands.

"Germany has surrendered," Erwin says, his voice equal parts hesitation and wonder. "The war is over."

Levi looks at him for a moment with a frown before returning to his task, hands steady when he rinses the blade in a bowl of water.

"Didn't you hear me, Levi?" Erwin asks him, amused.

"It's not as important as this," Levi tells him, turning Erwin's head to run the razor over his jaw.

Chapter End Notes

WARNINGS

- foul language
- sexual content
- violence

Chapter 25

Levi can feel the coughing starting as he lifts the last of the crates from the back of the truck and carries it up the stone steps; it's an incessant itching in his lungs whenever he grows out of breath that turns into a tearing in his chest when it finds no escape. He pinches his lips together to keep it in check until he's laid down the crate on the store room floor, only turning back toward it and Petra when he's managed a few deep breaths. She's lifting little boxes out of the crate, filling the silence with a quiet jingling of glass against glass.

"Morphine?" he asks her, answering her hesitant nod with an approving one; it won't help Erwin now, he doesn't need it anymore, but the sobbing and whimpering of the other officers that interrupts Levi's dreams at night makes him glad they've gotten a fresh delivery.

Petra turns to him with a smile and says something in her own language and though Levi doesn't understand, he listens politely anyway. It's how they communicate, speaking past each other, smiling and nodding their responses, perhaps to feel more like they're helping each other, or maybe just to feel less alone. When they leave the storage room together they make a few universal sounds: of tiredness, of hurry, of knowing the day's just getting started.

They descend into the basement kitchen where another nurse is filling bowls with porridge and placing them on trays with slices of bread. Levi starts transferring them into the trolley, piling them one on top of the other and finishing with the tray that carries a large teapot and a selection of cups. He uses his fingers to tell Petra which ward he's planning to visit and she checks her clipboard before counting the trays and removing one. When he gets to the soldiers with their breakfast, it only takes Levi a moment to realise which one of them has died during the night: the red-haired one with the bullet wound to his side who barely made it through his surgery in the first place.

He starts handing out the trays, answering the men's words of thank you with curt nods; he doesn't want to speak German to them. The newest arrivals still look at him with curiosity and suspicion, but the ones who have been here longer often manage weak smiles. Some of the men are still sleeping and Levi wakes them gently, gesturing to the food which they accept once he's helped them sit up against the metal headboards of their beds. Slowly the room fills with soft clinks of spoons against the sides of bowls and the quiet conversation that usually accompanies breakfast. Levi pours the tea and carries it to the patients before leaving the room, using the elevator to get back to the kitchen with his trolley; the canteen is starting to fill up with those who can manage the trip downstairs for their meals. It's how most of his mornings start now; a routine that keeps him busy, something to be grateful for.

Levi makes a quick stop at the kitchen to pour two cups of tea and to fill a tray with two bowls of porridge before heading back up the stairs all the way to the officers' quarters on the second floor. He has expected to find Erwin sitting up in his bed reading some book he's found in the hospital's library but instead finds a man in uniform sitting by his bedside, posture rigid and expression serious, voice lowered to the point where Levi can barely hear him though he's standing at the door. He looks on for a moment, half hidden in the shadows as he studies Erwin's face, tries to decipher whether it's good news or bad, but there's nothing

to be read on the man's features save for dutiful respect and the traces of the hours he's spent lying awake in his bed. Frowning, Levi walks forward and lays the tray down onto the small nightstand, feeling Erwin's eyes on him as he does. He turns in time to see the officer glancing at the bowls of porridge before taking his leave, walking out with steady steps that make the silence sprout claws and teeth.

"That's the third time now," Levi remarks quietly, looking after the officer for a moment before handing Erwin his breakfast.

"Just a few follow-up questions," Erwin explains, though Levi didn't ask. "Nothing to worry about."

Levi hums a response that's neither here nor there, feeling an unease he can't quite shake as he sits down at the foot of Erwin's bed. The silence stretches as they begin to eat, ending only when Erwin's grip on his spoon falters and he drops some porridge down the front of his shirt. He sighs wearily, accepting the towel Levi hands him and cleaning away the mess, letting Levi finish the job, though he can tell from the swear he hisses under his breath that it doesn't please him.

"We'll need to keep practising today," Levi tells him, earning another weary sigh, "and we should go for a walk after breakfast. You'll start growing moss soon if you don't get out of this bed more."

"Yes, I know," Erwin mutters, turning back to his breakfast once Levi puts away the towel. "I don't like how it made you cough last time."

Levi scoffs. "Believe me, if fooling around with you doesn't kill me, neither will a stroll in the garden," he says, lowering his voice though none of the other officers in the room has ever expressed any knowledge of German.

"You shouldn't say things like that," Erwin tells him half-sternly, laying his bowl aside and picking up his cup of tea. "I spoke with the doctor. There isn't the slightest chance that the contusions in your lungs could be fatal."

"Then why worry so much?" Levi asks him, sipping his own tea.

"I'm not worried," Erwin says quietly, lifting his gaze to meet Levi's, "but I don't like seeing you in any distress."

"Imagine how I've felt then," Levi mutters, catching Erwin glancing at the stump of his arm; the silence descends on them again until Levi breaks it. "You didn't sleep much last night."

Erwin empties his cup of tea and lays it down on the nightstand before shaking his head. "It... It keeps itching."

Levi surveys the empty space under Erwin's stump for a few seconds before catching the man's gaze again. "Has the doctor been by yet?"

Erwin shakes his head. "There isn't much he can do about it, so it feels silly to bring it up."

“I think you should,” Levi says, sounding sterner than he intended. “He should know about that, shouldn’t he?”

Erwin half-agrees with a grunt. “I’ve heard it’s quite a common consequence, but one with no definitive treatment. It could be a lot worse, in any case.”

“Well it can’t be very good if it keeps you up half the night, can it?” Levi huffs in annoyance. “You should stop being so damn proud.”

“This is hardly a matter of pride, Levi,” Erwin says with a hint of a smile playing on his lips. “I simply wish to focus my efforts elsewhere, to making my left hand as fully functioning as I can. It’s a case of prioritising that which seems most important.”

For a moment Levi wonders whether Erwin isn’t telling the truth, whether he’s using the phantom pain to punish himself for whatever crime he’s imagining, but when the doctor visits the officers’ quarters some half an hour later, he confirms much of what Erwin has said: that there isn’t much he can do about the phantom pain here, that Erwin should wait until he’s back home in England where he can receive better care, that the most he’ll be able to help with are matters pertaining to mobility, balance and the functioning of the remaining hand. Levi listens to all of it with a frown when Erwin translates the doctor’s words, turning to the man with his usual question: “How can I help?”

“Keep doing what you have been doing,” the doctor tells him with a smile, “but do not help too much.”

Levi clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes at the emphatic look Erwin gives him. “Well I don’t wipe your arse for you, do I?”

“No,” Erwin agrees with yet another weary sigh, “admittedly you do not.”

And still it’s all Levi can do to keep his hands to himself while Erwin buttons up his shirt, while he buckles his belt, only stepping forward to pin down his empty sleeve. They take their morning stroll in the garden, marvelling at the weather that even so early in the morning is as hot as your average day in July or August. The heat has tempted the world back to life, pulled flowers from the rich, dark earth and awoken butterflies to rest their wings on the blossoms and rosebuds and long blades of grass. Nothing is tame here, there’s no gardener to keep life in check; it crawls out of the flowerbeds and onto the stone paths, fills the holes left behind by bombs, grows taller by the day, unchallenged, under the trees and the lilac bushes by which Levi and Erwin stop, sitting on a chipped white bench, breathing in the heady scent of the flowers. The singing of birds is a background hum, filling the silence that they both seem hesitant to break.

“Do you think you’ll get a prosthetic—”

“Please, Levi,” Erwin interrupts him quietly. “It’s such a lovely day. Couldn’t we talk about something else?”

The words make Levi flinch and he turns toward the garden, letting his eyes follow a pair of people crossing the paved area from the side entrance to the fountain which stands useless in

the middle of the space, filled with murky water and a few sickly waterlilies: a nurse and a young man in a wheelchair, both legs now mere bandaged stumps. It's a double bind; he wants a distraction from the things they do not say, but also wants to show Erwin enough respect to think of something else than the missing arm. His failure makes him bristle with frustration, makes him wring his hands in his lap, makes Erwin sigh again tiredly.

"Levi," he starts warily. "I know you don't want to think about—"

"Stop it," Levi says at once, not looking at Erwin. "We don't have to talk about the arm, it's fine, but I don't want to talk about—"

"But we can't just pretend that this is going to—"

"I told you to stop it," Levi says, pushing the words out through gritted teeth, his fingers digging into his thighs, his sweaty palms leaving dark smears on the fabric. He wants to say something else – that they've got more time, that they can talk about it later, that this can all end without any of those words being uttered – but it all gets stuck in his throat, tears it, like he's swallowing razors. For a moment they merely sit there, the birdsong around them like gunfire, ripping through the silence.

"Were you helping Petra again this morning?" Erwin finally asks, letting Levi draw a breath.

"More morphine came in," Levi says, though it's hardly news and it hardly matters. "We'll all sleep better."

Erwin grunts in agreement, flexing his fingers in a way that seems absent-minded to Levi. "It's good you have something to do," he says quietly. "I know how it gets for you when you're idle for too long."

"I might help out with lunch and dinner too, if you're going to read," Levi thinks aloud, glancing at Erwin, "or if one of those officers comes back to talk to you."

"I don't expect them to," Erwin tells him, leaning his arm on the backrest of the bench.

"What did they want to know this time?" Levi asks, though he's dreading the feeling he gets every time, like there's something Erwin isn't telling him.

"As I told you, just some follow-up questions," Erwin says with a smile that seems too quick and easy to Levi. "They asked more things about the operation as a whole, how I'm adjusting now that it's over, that sort of thing. And they want my help with something."

"What's that then?" Levi asks, growing sour. "Even after asking about all that they still don't think you've done your share, is that it?"

"It's nothing very strenuous, believe me," Erwin assures him, his smile growing more genuine. "It seems they're having some difficulty identifying the prisoners-of-war in their care accurately, and they were hoping I could be of assistance in the matter."

"They know you shouldn't leave the hospital yet, don't they?" Levi asks, only nodding when Erwin confirms this. "I suppose it's alright then – give you something to do."

The man lets out a quiet laugh, as warm as the air around them. “Thank you for giving me your permission, Levi,” he says. “I don’t know how I would have managed without it.”

Levi gives him a sour look before allowing himself a quick smile. “I told you, if you don’t like me taking care of you, you’d better learn to take care of yourself.”

“I’m afraid I’m quickly getting used to you taking care of me,” Erwin tells him, gazing at the garden, suddenly absent-minded again. “If we’re not careful, I’ll forget how to do things on my own – and so will you.”

Levi stares at Erwin for a moment, wishing he would turn to face him but still relieved when he doesn’t. In the continuing silence, the heat of the day grows heavy and pressing, forcing Levi onto his feet. Erwin follows his example without speaking, walking back to the officers’ ward ahead of Levi, who only returns for lunch. Afterwards they throw around a small ball the doctor brought them near a week ago, and Levi is surprised again by the speed and accuracy of Erwin’s left-handed catch and throw, and how fast he has improved.

While Erwin practises writing, Levi plays klondike and helps bring the soldiers downstairs their dinner of stew and pickled cabbage. There are two new arrivals, both of whom try to ask him something, growing confused when he merely shakes his head. They get their explanations from the people whose beds are close by, though the answers seem to confuse them even further. The bearded soldier in the second bed from the door has learned to thank Levi in his own language; the gesture is touching, and it stops Levi in his tracks for a moment before he can think to nod and smile.

In the evening Levi lies awake in his own small bed, looking up at Erwin’s face as he reads, eyes rushing through line after line, page after page. Erwin knows he is watching; it’s clear from the little twitch of a smile he gives whenever Levi shifts under his covers, waiting for whichever comes first, sleep or the heavy breathing of the other patients in the room. Tonight, like most nights, sleep wins; it’s nearly as big a comfort as Erwin’s arms around him, as Erwin’s breathing on the skin of his neck – a few hours of nothing at all.

The days at the hospital have just started to grow too alike for Levi’s taste when a soldier enters the room one morning with Petra and, after a salute and a quick explanation, starts gathering up Erwin’s things.

“What’s he doing?” Levi asks at once, jumping up and stepping aside when a nurse walks in and starts stripping the linens off Erwin’s bed. “What’s going on?”

“It’s been requested that I be relocated to a private room,” Erwin explains, showing no sign of surprise as far as Levi can see it. “I’m sure it’s no cause for concern.”

“You’ve said that before,” Levi mutters, frowning as Erwin picks up his book and follows Petra and the soldier out of the room.

They walk along the second-floor corridor to its end before taking a left and entering the eastern wing of the building through double doors of solid wood, passing through a large

room into another hallway. Erwin's new room stands along it, empty save for a bed and a nightstand, a desk and a chair, and two cardboard boxes full of papers and folders in the corner. Levi crinkles his nose when he walks in, expecting the smell of dust but finding the room cleaner than he assumed it would be. He turns the light switch; nothing happens.

"I'm sure someone can find a new light bulb somewhere," Erwin comments, laying his book down on the nightstand. "Or perhaps some candles."

"Are they going to drag my bed in here as well?" Levi mutters, more thinking aloud than asking the question, but Erwin passes it on to Petra and the soldier anyway.

"He says he's had no instructions about that," Erwin explains after they've talked for a moment. "I'm sure they won't leave you to sleep on the floor."

Levi clicks his tongue but doesn't speak, taking a seat on the bed when Petra and the soldier take their leave, closing the door behind themselves; though they leave it unlocked, something about it reminds Levi of the Gestapo cell.

"I don't like this," Levi mutters as Erwin takes a seat in the chair by the desk.

"I'm sure it's nothing to worry about," he replies; the more he says it, the more uneasy Levi feels.

It takes the officers several hours to come by. They march into the room in a line that turns into a row once they're all past the door. They only stay for a quarter hour or so, and it seems to Levi they've come to announce something rather than to ask questions. Erwin only asks a few himself, nodding whenever one of the officers falls quiet. Levi watches them all from the bed, bristling with a nervousness, his own unasked questions chasing each other in his mind. Finally they leave, all save for one, and Levi turns to Erwin for answers.

"It appears some accusations have been made against me," the man tells him calmly, as if keeping his tone pleasant is going to soothe Levi. "My loyalty to the crown has been called into question – as has my conduct as an officer."

"What for?" Levi demands. "Because you came back to Dresden?"

"I assume so," Erwin says, glancing at the soldier still left in the room. "They've appointed Peer here as my legal counsel."

"Legal counsel," Levi repeats, barely noticing the other man who greets him using clumsy German. "You need legal counsel."

"There are to be hearings into the matter," Erwin says now, as if Levi's tone has been as calm as his. "Until this whole matter has been put to rest, I won't be as free to come and go as I've been so far."

"What does that mean, 'not as free'?"

"I'll be allowed regular strolls in the garden but otherwise I am not permitted to leave the building," Erwin explains. "I've also been asked to keep from discussing this whole business

with others.”

“Why?”

“I suppose they find it embarrassing, having an officer under scrutiny like this,” he says with a smile that Levi guesses he intends as reassuring. “That’s all I really know so far. We’ll have to wait to find out the details.”

“Who’s making the accusations?” Levi asks, gritting his teeth when Erwin shrugs.

“We don’t know yet,” he admits, continuing to smile while Levi’s frown grows deeper. “Perhaps the operative whose car I stole that night – he would certainly have cause to complain.”

Levi makes a sound that resembles agreement as Erwin gets up from the chair and offers the seat to Peer. The man sits down, lips curving into a polite smile under a thin moustache as he offers a cigarette to Erwin who looks back at Levi with a question.

“You don’t need my permission, do you?” Levi asks him in response, managing a half smile when Erwin refuses the smoke.

Levi stays in the room when Peer and Erwin start discussing the case, listening more and more absently to their words, growing more and more restless until finally he leaves to help the nurses with the lunch rush. When he comes back, Peer is gone and Erwin is sitting at the desk, going through the contents of the boxes he’s managed to lift from the floor.

“What are you looking at those for?” Levi asks him sullenly, sitting down heavily on the bed.

“I was just wondering what they were,” Erwin mutters absently, eyes never straying from the page. “Someone was doing research here. It’s quite interesting.”

“Shouldn’t you focus on something else?”

“There’s nothing I can do for now but wait,” the man continues in the same distracted tone. “I thought these would take my mind off it.”

“So you are worried,” Levi comments, feeling a twinge of dread when he sees Erwin’s brow drawing to a frown.

“It’s just raising too many questions that can’t be answered yet,” Erwin replies, closing a folder and opening another one instantly. “I only like mysteries that I can solve.”

Levi falls quiet, trying to read into Erwin’s posture, the way his eyes narrow at the words on the sheet of paper, the way his hand keeps coming up to massage the stump of his arm, but there’s nothing to be read about what Erwin is thinking and feeling beyond the lack of concern that to Levi seems to near indifference. He turns away tiredly, wondering whether he should trust Erwin over the gnawing disquiet in his chest, whether Erwin would intentionally keep him in the dark and choose relieving his worry over being honest. There are no answers to these mysteries either, and Levi quickly leaves Erwin to his distractions, finding his own in the kitchen. He doesn’t return to the room until he has time to sit down for dinner; they eat it

off trays in the persisting silence. Levi tries to find something to say but everywhere he looks – the past, the present, the future – all he faces are subjects he'd rather avoid.

“No one has brought your bed here,” Erwin finally says, as if noticing it for the first time. “I forgot to ask about that.”

“I guess I'll go ahead and take care of it then,” Levi mutters. “They've let me be until now. I don't understand why they'd suddenly have a problem with it.”

“I'm sure you're right,” Erwin agrees, emptying his cup of tea as Levi gets up to take the trays away.

That night Levi lies in bed and listens to the rain drumming against the room's only window; the sound – like everything these days – is something to fight against, pushing up memories that Levi has buried countless times, lying idle like this. He listens to Erwin's breathing, longs for the warmth of his body that he knows would drive away some of the ghosts that have gathered in the room. But Erwin needs his rest, and Levi lets him sleep, turning onto his side and pulling the covers up to his ear to try and muffle the pattering of the rain; the shadows in the room invade his dreams.

After a few days Levi learns that the change of location doesn't need to affect the routine they have built here. They take their morning walk in the garden after breakfast, the doctor visits twice a day, Levi helps Erwin train his left hand whenever he's not busy helping around the hospital. There's a calm repetitiveness to all of it, one that lulls Levi into a good, deep sleep on most nights with the warmth of Erwin's hand still lingering on his cheek. In the mornings Levi sometimes wonders why they're not taking advantage of the privacy they've suddenly come across, why they don't share a bed, why they don't make each other sigh and moan now that there is no one to hear, but none of it seems to bother Erwin, and Levi doesn't know how to ask.

After a week they start having their meals in the hospital's canteen where the noise and life seem to lift Erwin's spirits. Levi likes to watch him as he talks with the other patients; they share stories of war, start letting go of it already, and Levi follows in a sort of quiet awe as Erwin goes from sad and understanding one minute to laughing at a joke the next. They all like him, just like the Americans did, and accept Levi's presence all the faster for it. Levi gets so used to the pleasantness of his mealtimes that when he glances up from his soup to find Erwin's expression growing angry and closed off, his heart starts beating wildly in his chest.

“What is it?” he asks in a hasty whisper, turning his eyes toward the door when Erwin nods in its direction, finding a familiar figure loitering by it, an officer's peaked cap tucked under his arm: Darlett.

Levi clicks his tongue and hisses, “What is he doing here?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Erwin mutters stiffly.

His features darken when Darlett spots them from across the room and starts walking toward them; Erwin has stood up from his seat before he's taken more than half a dozen steps, his posture so rigid it looks painful to Levi, who stands up as well. Erwin replies to Darlett's greeting in German, making the other man scoff derisively.

"Having some trouble letting go of it?" Darlett asks, glancing at Levi. "You might find it easier if you disposed of some of the baggage you've dragged along with you."

Before Levi can react, Erwin has stepped forward and punched Darlett flat in the face, moving to grab a hold of the collar of his shirt as soon as the other man lifts his hands to his bleeding nose. Levi steps forward to pull at Erwin's arm but his hold is firm, unyielding, too strong for Levi even now. His anger is fixed so fast on his face that it prompts other soldiers to rush to their feet and pull him off Darlett who turns to Erwin and Levi, his teeth bared.

"Have you lost your damn mind?!" he shouts, spitting blood onto the floor. "You could've broken my bloody nose!"

"How dare you stand there? How dare you wear that uniform?" Erwin snaps back at him. "How dare you say such a thing to me after what you did, after leaving us all for dead just to save your own miserable, meaningless life?"

"How dare I?" Darlett counters, still wiping at his blood-stained face. "I did what I had to do, what I was trained to do! I prioritised the operation, it's all I have ever done, so don't you dare come and tell me—"

"You have a daughter," Erwin says, his voice low and full of contempt. "You left your own child and the woman you married to suffer a fate worse than—"

"What would you have had me do?" Darlett asks him, his eyes glinting like a madman's. "Should I have brought them back with me to England? Introduced them to my parents? A woman who thought she was marrying a Nazi and a child who might as well be a bastard as far as I'm concerned."

"Have you no decency?" Erwin growls, sending a shiver down Levi's spine. "You used them to keep your own neck safe, to keep yourself—"

"I used the enemy to secure the success of the operation," Darlett interrupts him in a whisper, as if suddenly growing aware of the crowd that's fallen utterly silent. "It's what I was sent over here to do. It's what has helped us win the war, and I will be damned before I apologise to you or anyone else for it."

He crouches down to pick up his hat that's fallen onto the floor, giving Erwin one last contemptuous look before he turns on his heels and marches out, breaking the calm of the room as soon as he steps out the door. Next to Levi, Erwin sinks back into his chair, flexing the fingers of his hand absently, the knuckles screaming red against the paleness of his skin. Later that day Levi carries a bowl of cold water into Erwin's room, cleaning the nicks and contusions on his hand gently with a soft washcloth of white linen.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” Erwin whispers. “It will paint a poor picture of me to the judges.”

“If they knew Darlett they’d understand it,” Levi says, squeezing extra water out of the cloth and placing it on top of Erwin’s knuckles, relishing the quiet puff of laughter his words tempt out.

“I’m not so sure they would,” Erwin replies, sighing. “Men like Darlett always have their hour of glory in the end.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “What you gave him was a lot more fitting,” he mutters, smiling as Erwin laughs again.

“I’m finding it difficult to feel genuinely sorry about it,” he admits, leaning against the wall, “though I know it wasn’t the right thing to do. I just can’t help feeling that he is partly responsible.”

Levi agrees in a quiet hum, not needing to ask what Erwin is referring to; the same thought has occurred to him. He winds a bandage quickly around Erwin’s hand and takes a seat next to him, leaning his back against the wall and sighing.

“I guess we can always hope he’ll start avoiding you from now on,” he says, glancing up at Erwin as he scoffs.

“We might as well hope he doesn’t come to tell any tales at the hearing,” he replies, and Levi catches the first hint of worry on his face.

They’re not told the time and place of the hearing until two days before it, and during those two days Levi tries to stay out of the way as Erwin and Peer discuss the case. When he returns to the room in the evenings, he asks Erwin what is new, but Erwin’s answer is the same both times, that he knows very little of anything he didn’t know before. Despite the uneasiness that tears at his mind, it’s all Levi can do to nod and say something that passes for encouraging, though Erwin doesn’t seem to need it, still as calm as ever when they’re driven up to the town’s old courthouse. Levi watches him from the bench he’s been guided to, sees him shake hands with Peer before taking a seat, blending into the wealth of uniforms around him.

The judge presiding over the hearing is an older man, bearded and grey but still somehow exuding a sense that he is not entirely past his prime as he takes his place among other officers, sitting higher than the rest of them behind the podium. Levi listens to the low tone of his voice, not understanding a word he says, growing more nervous after every question he asks from Peer, trying to see over the heads of the people gathered there to catch a glimpse of Erwin’s face but his eyes meet nothing but the undercut of his hair, which he carefully trimmed just a few hours earlier.

Levi looks around himself at the few men sitting close by and wonders whether any of them know German, but decides not to ask, thinking it better not to draw attention to himself.

Instead he wrings his hands in his lap and grits his teeth, trying to see any glimpse of emotion on the old officer's face when he makes some sort of announcement that is followed at once by a door opening in the corner of the room near the podium. There's a moment of calm that fills with the steady clicking of shoes against the polished wooden floor of the courthouse, an odd sound, sharp and precise but different from the marching Levi hears in the hospital; it's only when the footsteps enter the hall that Levi understands why.

She takes a seat in the witness box, dark hair pinned up with a silver clasp that shines in the light pouring in through the high windows. She's wearing a blue dress and a pair of heels, holding a handbag in one of her gloved hands. Levi watches as she turns to the judge with a smile that reveals a row of perfect white teeth, her hand raised gracefully to brush against the string of pearls around her neck. She says a few things in a language they all understand before a man stands up behind a table next to Peer and Erwin's and makes a statement, after which she begins to speak in German, her expression showing nothing but gratitude and delight. Levi can feel his breath hitching in his throat as soon as she opens her mouth.

"I am so grateful to be allowed to give my account of what happened in my own language," Lilian starts in her sing-song voice. "I am of course making many efforts to learn English, but when it comes to matters as important as this, one doesn't want to be misunderstood."

"Of course, Mrs Hastings," the judge allows, glancing quickly at a man sitting at the back of the courtroom. "We all appreciate your presence here today."

"Thank you, sir. I in turn appreciate the chance to be heard," Lilian responds, her smile widening when she turns back toward the room after the judge urges her to explain in her own words the events that took place. "Well, I first met the Sturmbannführer... Excuse me, Major Smith, at a social event we both attended in Berlin in 1941. Though introductions were made at the time, my late husband and I moved to Dresden soon after that, and I didn't see the Major again until he was relocated to Dresden as well, to the office of the SS-Personalhauptamt."

"And how was your relationship with Major Smith?"

Levi glances again at the back of Erwin's head, biting the inside of his cheek nervously as Lilian continues with a lie so blatant Levi nearly scoffs out loud.

"Oh, perfectly friendly," Lilian goes on, tossing her dark curls over her shoulder. "We moved in the same circles, attended the same parties. We were good acquaintances."

"And you never suspected Major Smith of not being Sturmbannführer Holtz, as he was presenting himself?" the judge asks her now, and her eyes widen a fraction.

"No, I had absolutely no idea, none of us did," she exclaims, bringing her hand up to her necklace again. "In his role as Sturmbannführer Major Smith was... extremely convincing."

"So to you and everyone else he appeared to be perfectly loyal to Hitler and the Nazi party he claimed to be working for?"

"Yes," Lilian asserts at once. "He never gave us cause to question it."

“I see,” the judge says, something thoughtful in his tone. “Please, carry on.”

“Thank you,” she replies pleasantly, turning back toward the room again. “I really didn’t find out he had any other affiliations – until shortly before last Christmas, when I was approached by Generalleutnant Osterhaus who informed me that my late husband had formed an arrangement with him.”

With these words, Levi’s blood begins to run cold in his body. He tries again to see over the rows of people, craning his neck as far as he can without drawing too much attention to himself, giving up after mere seconds when someone in the row behind Erwin’s turns to look behind himself.

“And what did this arrangement entail?”

Lilian falls quiet for a moment, an expression of well-rehearsed concern on her features. “Your honour, if you would permit me to explain something about my late husband. You see, there exist documents that state that the reason for his imprisonment was an abominable crime – but those statements are a lie. My late husband was executed because he was found to have been working against Hitler. For this they not only needed to get rid of him, but also to lie about why.”

“Yes, well...” the judge says, glancing again at the man at the back of the room. “In our investigations we found no indications of your husband having been involved in any—”

“But you must admit, your honour,” Lilian exclaims, “if there’s one thing that can be said about the Germans it’s that they are very efficient. They wouldn’t have left behind a single bit of evidence about it.”

“And why do you think they would have gone to such lengths, Mrs Hastings?”

“My late husband was an important man,” she explains, a touch of sorrow in her voice, “and if there was one thing Hitler could not stand, it was betrayal and embarrassment.”

The judge takes a moment before sighing. “I see,” he says again. “And what of this arrangement your late husband made, Mrs Hastings?”

“Once my late husband realised that his true loyalties had been discovered, he was forced to attempt to secure an escape for himself and his family,” Lilian says as calmly as before. “He had made some very powerful enemies. He contacted Generalleutnant Osterhaus to arrange an exit from the Third Reich for myself and the children, first and foremost. Unfortunately his enemies got to him before he could benefit from this plan himself.”

“And what does any of this have to do with Major Smith?”

“The Generalleutnant told me that he knew someone who could get us safely across France from Geneva, someone who had already secured the exits of several of the Generalleutnant’s... less blameless acquaintances,” Lilian says. “Imagine my surprise when I found out that someone was none other than Sturmbannführer— Excuse me, Major Smith.”

“And how did Major Smith arrange this?”

“It was the Generalleutnant who got us tickets to Geneva,” Lilian says, “though in truth of course my late husband had been forced to pay him an enormous sum of money for his help and the travel papers to Switzerland. In Geneva we were received by an acquaintance of Major Smith, who presented us with false papers and smuggled us to the French coast. Once there we met a man by the name of Reeves, who instructed us to get onto a ship heading for South America.”

“But you didn’t,” the judge comments, turning suddenly to riffle through the pile of papers on the podium.

“No,” Lilian confirms, her eyes sparkling with tears. “You can imagine my desperation. My husband had recently been executed by a crumbling yet still terrifying regime, I had two small children with me and little money. I didn’t see what sort of a life I could have made for myself there.”

“Yes,” the judge says, sounding suddenly disinterested. “You were a dancer before you married, is that right?”

Levi can see Lilian’s posture straightening, and she takes a moment to purse her lips. “I was a waitress,” she corrects the judge, only remembering to smile again when she continues. “Truly, if I hadn’t met my husband then, I don’t know what would have become of me and my poor children. He really saved my life.”

“Yes,” the judge says again, his eyes flashing toward the man at the back of the room. “You were indeed very fortunate, Mrs Hastings.”

“And I thank God every day for it, and for how he, in his mercy, led me finally to be amongst the most civilised of people,” Lilian replies, her voice so sweet it makes Levi shudder.

“Yes,” the judge says a third time, turning back to his papers. “Well, thank you for your account of the circumstances, Mrs Hastings. I doubt we’ll need anything more from you.”

“Oh, I think there is one more thing you ought to know.”

Levi can feel his heart skipping a beat as the judge looks up.

“And what is that, Mrs Hastings?” he asks, dropping the papers back onto the podium.

Lilian shifts in her seat, looking suddenly very uneasy. “Well,” she begins. “One should hardly speak of these things, and I have struggled over whether I should be bringing this up or not, but...” She takes another pause, biting her lip. “During my acquaintance with Herr Sturmbann... Excuse me, Major Smith, I more than once suspected that he might have... How should I put this? That he might have had... inappropriate relationships.”

Levi sees the judge’s eyes shifting to the officers sitting either side of him, and the way the man clears his throat makes Levi realise how dry his own mouth is. “Is there a way you could... elaborate on that without—”

“I remember he had in his service a young man,” Lilian says, clutching at her pearls again. “Dark hair, rather... small and odd-looking. He called him a housekeeper but... Well, what little I saw of his apartment left some room for doubt regarding that claim.”

Levi takes a deep breath as he tries to simultaneously sink between the rows of benches and peer over to Erwin, though he doesn't know what he wishes to read from the back of his head. He clenches his hands into fists around a wrinkle of loose fabric on his trousers, not knowing himself whether it's because he's nervous or because he's angry. Up on the podium the judge clears his throat again.

“Yes, well,” he says, collecting his papers slowly and purposefully. “It might suit us better to focus our attention on the more... I mean, to focus our attention on the more pressing matter, namely the accusations that Major Smith willingly assisted in arranging the exit of some individuals from the Third Reich.” He stops to clear his throat again. “We are currently employed in efforts to track down the Mr Reeves you mentioned, Mrs Hastings, to get someone to verify your story – since both your former husband and Generalleutnant Osterhaus are deceased.”

“Thank you, your honour,” Lilian says, her eyes sparkling, “for granting me this opportunity to begin my new life with a clean conscience.”

“Yes,” the judge says again, turning away from Lilian and addressing the room again in a language Levi doesn't understand.

Next to Erwin Peer says a few words before the judge stands up and they all follow suit, exiting the building in a sea of whispers and murmurs. Levi skulks out ahead of Erwin, turning one more time to catch a glimpse of Lilian's blue dress disappearing through the door behind the podium.

They drive back to the hospital in silence, Levi, Erwin and Peer, like they're all waiting to be safe in Erwin's room before uttering a single word. There are a hundred questions clawing at Levi's mind, nearly forcing him to bite his tongue when at the door to his room Erwin turns to him, apology etched onto his features.

“I'd like to talk to Peer alone for a moment, if you don't mind.”

Levi stops at the threshold and meets Erwin's eyes, dying to ask why and finding he lacks the courage, after everything he's done, to find out the answer. He turns to look at the room instead, taking in the specks of dust dancing in the ray of sun that pierces the air. Without saying anything, without looking at Erwin again, Levi nods slowly and walks away, out of the hospital and into the garden where he sits down under the lilac bushes while one side of him fights to think and the other fights not to.

His guilt wins; it's overwhelming, it drowns him, it makes him wish his bones would break inside his body, that his lungs would collapse from how hard it is to breathe. He sees the situation now, how it all unravelled, and he follows the disintegration to its source, sees himself in Osterhaus' office, hears himself speaking that name: “Sturmbannführer Holtz. It's from Sturmbannführer Holtz.” He still remembers what Erwin told him later, that he had managed admirably, that the one who had responsibility was Erwin, his commanding officer,

his Commander. But Levi's not really a soldier, and Erwin doesn't really command him, and he doesn't understand how he's not responsible, it doesn't fit his logic but leaves him staring at the murky water in the fountain like he wants to drown himself in it.

None of it makes sense anymore, how it could have come to this, how jumping in through an open window could have led him to love so much, to risk so much, and to ruin so much of the person he loves too. And Erwin would accept no apology and offer no forgiveness, he'd never admit that any of this is Levi's fault but who then can absolve him if not Erwin, who can teach him to live with himself, to live with this if not Erwin? Levi bites his teeth together, his fingers digging into his thighs as he fights the urge to tear out his hair, his eyes, his tongue for speaking the wrong name all those months ago, for making that one slip for which he'll pay for the rest of his life, for which Erwin will...

He doesn't want to know and can't live without knowing. What will happen to Erwin if he's found guilty? How harsh are the British, what punishments do they prefer? All Levi's ever known are the camps and the guillotine in Münchner Platz, men who come into your home in the middle of the night and shoot you dead in the street below your own window. They must be better than the Nazis; it's the hope Levi clings to, the only thing keeping him from the fountain now, the only thing that makes it possible for him to return to Erwin's room once the sun begins to set and the dinner has been eaten and the plates in the kitchen are clean and dry.

They've posted a guard at the door, a young man with red hair who doesn't think to straighten his posture until Levi's two metres from him, and then he springs to his feet from leaning against the wall. His German is adequate, but during the few words they exchange he still pulls out a small dictionary to check a word, all in order to explain to Levi that no one is allowed into Erwin's room save for the doctor and a nurse.

"Listen to me, brat," Levi says, scowling at the soldier with his teeth gritted, his nerves shredding more with each word. "There's no one in this building who knows more about how to take care of him than me. I'm going into that room. You can try and stop me if you want – after all, we're already in a hospital. It'll help them patch you up afterwards, finding you so quickly."

The soldier's eyes widen and he takes a step back, leaving enough room for Levi to push through to the door and into the room where he finds Erwin lying on the bed reading plays by Goethe; his own bed is no longer there. Erwin is still in his uniform trousers though he's abandoned the jacket and hat and rolled up the sleeve of his left arm. Levi glances at the bare feet poking out of his pant legs and sits down on the chair by the desk.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think to come get you once we were done," Erwin says, laying the book flat against his broad chest. "You wouldn't have needed to stay away for so long."

"Gave me something to do," Levi comments, shrugging. "I guess you didn't need me."

"I don't like to need you, Levi," Erwin tells him, placing a bookmark between the pages and putting the book down on the nightstand, "and I wouldn't like you to think I do."

"I know, you do just fine without me," he replies, smiling though he doesn't feel like it. "As long as you keep wearing shoes with no laces."

Erwin smiles too, though not widely and not for long. “The hearing revealed some things we didn’t expect,” he says, changing the subject so suddenly Levi has to repeat his words in his head. “Obviously Lilian showing up was... surprising.”

“She lied,” Levi says, though he knows Erwin’s better aware of it than he is. “About everything.”

“Not everything,” Erwin corrects him wearily, “but yes, there were many facts that she twisted. All in all it was an admirable performance.”

“Where did she come from?” Levi asks now. “And why is she called Mrs Hastings now?”

“It would appear that Lilian has found herself another very fortunate match,” Erwin explains, smiling more genuinely now. “I’m glad about that at least. I was afraid I had doomed her and the children when I urged her to leave Dresden. I’m happy that my actions seem to have saved her.”

“Even after all that?” Levi insists; the thought makes his stomach lurch with anger. “After what she said up there? The way she kept calling you Holtz, like you were more him than yourself back there?”

“At times I was more Holtz than myself,” Erwin says, thoughtfully. “With her... At the end of the day there is little in what she said about me that doesn’t have a significant amount of truth to it.”

“So do they think...” Levi starts, stopping to think about his question. “So they’re questioning you because they think you...”

“Like I said, my loyalty to the crown has been questioned, as has my conduct during the operation,” Erwin explains. “Lilian’s story would have them assume I did it all voluntarily – which, again, is true, to some degree.”

“Can’t you tell them about Osterhaus?” Levi asks. “About how he was blackmailing you? How he was a threat to the operation?”

“I could have pulled myself from active duty,” Erwin says. “My reasons for staying were selfish. I can explain the situation to them in those terms, but I’m not sure they’ll be any less inclined to punish me for it.”

“Still, it has to be better than them thinking you’re a Nazi,” Levi argues and Erwin nods absent-mindedly. “Couldn’t you discredit her? Why would they take her word over yours?”

“Well, they’re not,” Erwin admits. “It’s why they’re trying to find Dima Reeves. Without him confirming her story, it’ll just be her word against mine, and they’re much more likely to take my word for it. I suspect the only reason they’ve agreed to listen to her at all is because of who her husband is.”

“Someone important?”

“Not really, but related to someone extremely important, so his word has value,” Erwin says. “How someone like him married the widow of a Nazi officer at a time like this is beyond me – and with two children from her previous marriage as well. But then, perhaps there are some parts of her charm that I’m personally not inclined to respond to.”

Levi agrees in a hum, looking at the empty space where his little maid’s bed used to be. When Erwin addresses it, Levi can’t help flinching.

“It’s...” he starts, turning his eyes on the ceiling as he searches for words. “I would never allow them to keep you away completely. You know that, don’t you?”

Levi nods and shrugs. “Can’t give them anything else they could hold against you,” he mutters, shrugging again.

“It’s the one thing I want to hate her for,” Erwin whispers. “The one thing I really wish she hadn’t said.”

“It won’t be anything new, in any case,” Levi says; his smile feels like it’s pulling his face apart. “Better than when you were at the front.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees. “Much better than that.”

Their eyes meet from across the room, and Levi thinks he can see in Erwin’s the same longing he himself feels, to be close, to go back to something they had before, in the apartment, at the cottage, in the partisan camp, where the desperation that bled into their hands and mouths and limbs came from the fear of death. Levi can’t understand why this feels so different; it’s lifelong separation, just like death would be, and it makes no sense that this has dulled them so, that they’ve learned to avoid each other’s eyes and to keep their touches so civil and cold. As he watches Erwin now, Levi wonders whether they’re doing it to survive what comes after, to stop themselves feeling now, before it’s too late.

The soldier who stands guard takes Levi to his room, a glorified closet they’ve stuck him in to keep him out of the way. It has a sliver of a window and his little bed with the tattered green duffel bag sitting on top, but nothing else, and the only thing Levi finds bearable about it is how easy it is to clean. He sweeps the floor before he goes to bed that night, lying awake wondering why he finds the room so hateful, realising only at the edge of sleep how closely it resembles the small curtained-off alcove he used to sleep in before Kenny bought the shop and the apartment upstairs.

They wait for news about Dimo Reeves, avoiding the subject like the plague, both keeping busy and Levi suspects Erwin does it for the same reasons he does: to keep himself from thinking, to ease his guilt, to keep up the routine not to have time for idleness. He fulfils his promise to his superiors and helps them identify their prisoners, using the time he spent in the Personalhauptamt, as he puts it, “better now than he ever did in the past.” Levi happens by the room once when he’s busy with his folders, studying the photographs taken of the captured German men, discarding some at once, typing out a page or more for others. He’s copying the files of the officers from memory, and when Levi asks him how he does it, Erwin merely shrugs.

“It’s just a gift I was born with,” he says, flashing Levi a quick smile as he turns back to his work.

“I guess you won’t forget my face either then.”

This makes Erwin stop typing and he looks up, thick brows suddenly drawn to a deep frown. “I could never forget your face, Levi,” he whispers, and Levi hurries out of the room, burying the words under a mass of dirty dishes, a new supply delivery, a restless walk around the garden.

They call a second hearing a week after the first, though when they march out the men making their statements it’s clear even to Levi that they’ve not been able to find Dimo Reeves yet. They’re both young British army soldiers and as he makes his statement, the shorter of them keeps glancing at Erwin as if he is afraid that Erwin will jump at his throat. Levi understands nothing of what they say, but it’s clear they both recount things that surprise and displease the officers on the podium. Levi scratches little marks onto the bench with his nails, glancing around himself whenever his eyes aren’t fixed on the back of Erwin’s head.

“I remember them both,” Erwin later tells Levi when they’re back in his room. “They were among the soldiers I tortured for information at the front.”

“Where did they find them all of a sudden?” Levi asks, not sure whether he’s more angry or terrified.

“I don’t know,” Erwin says, “but I’m happy to see they at least made it out of there alive. Perhaps they ended up getting taken to a prison somewhere, released now that the war is over.”

“So what did they say?” Levi asks. “Do they understand that you had to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Erwin replies again, his gaze sinking as his lips draw to a strange half-smile and he whispers, “It appears all the ghosts of my past have been invited to this feast.”

“It’s so wrong. All of it,” Levi growls. “They know nothing about you. They know nothing. They...”

Erwin turns to look at him, eyes full of sympathy and such profound sadness it makes Levi grit his teeth against the pain of it. “I’m sorry,” he whispers. “This must be very difficult for you.”

Levi turns his eyes away, his whole being in revolt against it all: the trial, the parting, the fact that he can’t be there for Erwin even now, that he’s so weak, that it’s all his fault and it’s Erwin’s head on the block. He wants to wish now that Krieger had slit his throat or forced him onto a train, that he had never met Erwin, but how could he ever wish something like that, be as selfless as that, when this is what has brought him to life?

Without knowing what else to do, Levi crosses the room to Erwin's bed, straddles him and pushes his fingers into his hair. When he meets the blue of Erwin's eyes his gaze is unwavering, unflinching, as strong as he can make it.

"Listen to me," he whispers; the words are barely a breath, barely a spark of hope. "You are good. You are..."

"Levi—"

"No, listen to me," Levi starts again, trying to gather his thoughts, trying to find any combination of words that comes close to what he means. "You saved me. We would have died without you. You are... Your heart is..."

The surge of emotion makes Levi grit his teeth, makes him pull at Erwin's hair and press his forehead against Erwin's hard enough to make him groan from the ache. He feels Erwin's laughter; it vibrates and travels up through his thighs, all the way to the tips of his fingers.

"You always had a way with words," Erwin says and Levi tugs harder on a strand of his hair.

"Shut your mouth," Levi tells him in a whisper, trying not to smile. "I've never known anyone better... Anyone as good as you. You've given me... You've been..."

"I know, Levi," Erwin tells him, rubbing the back of Levi's head, fingertips pushing through the undercut. "I know."

Levi lets out the air in his lungs in one long sigh, feeling like he's been holding his breath for weeks. He lets his hands come down to Erwin's face, his thumbs drawing circles onto the stubbly skin of his cheeks, feeling the smile that lingers on his face. It's a moment of peace, one that threatens to break and dissolve but persists, and Levi feels himself holding it between them, in the space between their bodies – fragile, near impossible, a thing of wonder and hope.

From that day forward, Levi no longer works at the hospital, and Erwin no longer crafts files of SS-officers. They only leave the room for meals and walks around the garden, spending the rest of their time in the bed where Erwin reads Levi the books he's borrowed. The soldier who guards the door doesn't give them any trouble, not even during the first few nights when he stays awake long enough to see Levi clambering to his own room in the early hours of the morning.

They find Dimo Reeves a few days before the summer solstice. Peer delivers the news in person and spends the whole half an hour stroking his thin moustache nervously while he talks with Erwin. The announcement doesn't shock him, as far as Levi can see, and after Peer has left he turns to Levi and asks whether they should continue reading.

"Is that all you have to say?" Levi asks him, clicking his tongue when Erwin shrugs.

“Anything I say or do not say will hardly change the circumstance,” he replies. “I’d rather make sure we finish the book – I’d like to hear your thoughts on the ending.”

For Erwin’s sake, Levi fights every urge in his mind that tells him to get out of the room and ask Petra to teach him how to make sutures, to mop all the floors of the hospital, to shake Erwin by his shoulders and shout at him until his voice is raw, to make him angry just to see him feeling what Levi thinks he should be feeling, what he himself is. For Erwin’s sake Levi lies still, caught between Erwin’s chest and arm, slipping in and out of sleep from the steady softness of his voice, the warmth of his body, the closeness of him. When he lies awake at night, grinding the time that they’re wasting between his teeth, the only thought that brings him comfort is the selflessness he’s found; it eases his guilt, seeing how he helps Erwin. They don’t talk about the hearing, not until the hours before it can be counted with the fingers of one hand.

“Will they find you guilty?”

Erwin keeps his eyes on the ceiling when he whispers, “It seems likely – if Dima Reeves tells the truth.”

“Do you think he’d lie for you?” Levi asks next, frowning when Erwin shakes his head at once.

“He knows he’ll gain nothing by doing that,” the man says. “I doubt he’ll put my interest before his own.”

“Even if you’re innocent?”

At this Erwin finally looks at him, and the pity in his expression is almost enough to make Levi avert his gaze. “But I’m not innocent, Levi,” he says, brushing his knuckles against Levi’s cheek before he turns away again.

The following morning Levi helps Erwin get dressed, shines his boots, presses his trousers, pins up both his shirt sleeve and the sleeve of his uniform jacket in neat folds. It reminds him of the night when he helped Erwin get ready for the concert at the Semperoper, and as he looks the man over at the door, it occurs to him he might as well hate this uniform as much as he hated the first one. They ride over again in silence; Levi’s too nervous to talk, but Erwin simply looks as though he has nothing in particular to say.

To Levi the hearing is as much a haze as the previous ones, a roomful of faces that blur together, speaking words he doesn’t understand. He recognises Dima Reeves only because of where he sits when he gives his testimony, answering the judge’s questions, looking thoroughly uncomfortable. When he’s reached what Levi guesses is the end of his account, he turns to Erwin.

“Sorry, Mr Smith,” he says; Levi can see Erwin nodding back at him. “They make the rules now, you know. I’d be a fool to go against that.”

The judge’s decision is clear in the severity of his expression, in the weight of his voice, in the stifling silence he leaves behind. It’s only then that Levi looks around himself and takes

in the frowns, the people shaking their head in disapproval, the ones who smile as if they've just seen an enemy fall – but none of them smiles as widely and genuinely as Erwin.

“Dimo’s story confirmed it,” he tells Levi, that eerie expression still on his face. “I have been found guilty of aiding enemies of the crown escape justice, and of behaving in a manner unfit for an officer – those who wish to read between the lines on that last charge will undoubtedly do so.”

Levi sits on the bed, eyes on the floor, his mind humming with an emptiness; the only thing better than the pain that threatens to flood it. On the edge of his vision he can see Erwin drawing the chair closer to the bed and taking a seat, and he doesn’t understand the hesitation in his next words, why they make such a contrast with the ones he spoke earlier.

“Levi,” Erwin starts quietly. “It’s important to me that you understand.”

“Understand what?” Levi asks. “Understand why your own country is turning its back on you?”

“You shouldn’t blame them,” Erwin says. “They’ve found me guilty of a crime I committed. How can that be betrayal?”

“It’s all her fault,” Levi goes on, and it feels good to blame someone else for a change. “If she’d kept her mouth shut–”

“I would still be guilty,” Erwin interrupts him gently. “I chose to help Osterhaus. I chose to stay. The responsibility is mine, whether I receive my due punishment or not.”

“How can they not understand?” Levi huffs, his hands clenching into fists. “How can they not see how much you’ve given up? How can they not see that?”

“They sent me over here for a clear purpose,” Erwin says, “and they made it very clear that the means through which I should reach that purpose were not unlimited. I overstepped every boundary. I worked for myself, not the common good. I became a bad officer and a bad soldier.”

“You were just trying to protect yourself,” Levi argues, finally looking up from the floor. “You were protecting me. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“There are also many people I hurt,” Erwin counters. “Lilian for one. Anyone who was exploited by the people I helped escape. The soldiers I tortured.” His expression grows pained for a moment before relaxing. “One of them called me a monster.”

Levi can feel a shudder of hatred travelling down his spine, and he grits his teeth. “He had no right,” he hisses. “Don’t they know what you have–”

“He thought it was a good thing,” Erwin interrupts him, smiling in a way that makes Levi feel uncomfortable. “He said he feels no resentment toward me since it’s because of men like me, men who have been able to discard our humanity, that we’ve been able to defeat the enemy.”

Levi falls silent, watching Erwin's smile turn into quiet laughter. "But..." he starts, not knowing how to continue, searching for the words. "You're more human than anyone I've known. Don't they understand? Don't they see--"

"I know you see it," Erwin interrupts him, placing a gentle hand under his chin. "You see me, Levi, and you find no fault. But I cannot live my life if all I see are these things I've done."

"Doesn't..." Levi starts again but words are as tricky as they've ever been, falling out of reach, disappearing when he reaches for them. "Doesn't it... Don't I..."

"You said once that you'd always be the good I've done," Erwin says, pulling Levi forward, hand behind his neck. "For the rest of my life you will be that. But I can't run from this. I don't want to keep running."

It's a struggle Levi thought he'd forgotten, one that started all those months ago in Erwin's apartment when he first saw the exhaustion and guilt that were tearing Erwin apart, that made him ache with his own uselessness, when he could think of nothing better than a warm bath, and now, finally, the answer. He draws a deep breath, the floor blurring for a moment before he blinks and looks up, meeting Erwin's gaze without hesitation.

"Then stop," Levi whispers. "Erwin, stop running."

He looks at the smile on Erwin's lips, the little wrinkles it tempts out in the corners of his eyes, takes in every crease and curve and mark like he's memorising it. He lets Erwin's words echo in his mind. "Thank you, Levi. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

They say Erwin won't be taken away until they can arrange transportation. They say it can take days or weeks. They say a number of other things but to Levi this is the only thing that matters: how long? Every day he starts his life anew, fighting to live for the first time and the last, turning the rest of his life into a blur of grey so he can see every strand of gold in Erwin's hair, hear every breath he draws, feel all the warmth of his body. Every night he thinks there is nothing left to say and every morning he wakes up with a thousand things, a thousand questions, a thousand ways to say what they still won't say, what they won't ever say, as if they've made a wordless agreement against it for reasons even they no longer know.

It happens without warning on a Thursday, during the half an hour Levi takes to walk around the garden. They haven't cared about goodbyes; it means nothing to them that Levi can't remember the last words they exchanged. He stands at the door looking into the room where the only sign of Erwin is a book on the nightstand; even the sheets are gone. Levi turns away, walking halfway down the corridor before running back and picking up the book, tucking it under his arm as he walks out of the building, following the dusty road all the way to the edge of town before turning back again. Without knowing where to go or what to do, Levi sits down on the steps of the hospital, looking out across the courtyard, truly homeless now, and lost. The world, with its oceans and deserts and vast expanses of sky, seems too small to hold his pain.

“Excuse me,” someone says behind him; one of the nurses, her face nearly hidden behind a crate full of small cardboard boxes. “Would it be possible for you to sit somewhere else, please? We’re trying to load the truck.”

Levi springs to his feet, pressing the book against his chest as he steps aside, letting the nurse pass with a thank you. He walks down the steps to peer into the back of the truck, taking a quick count of the supplies; food, morphine, penicillin, bandages.

“What is all this for?” he asks the nurse when she returns, jumping in to take up the other end of the crate she carries.

“We’re sending volunteers to a displaced persons camp,” she explains, huffing out a breath. “There are lots of people needing help. If you ask me, it’s about time we started doing something about it.”

Levi nods, still looking at the supplies, the tips of his fingers drumming a quick, uneven rhythm against the linen covers of the book. “Do you suppose...” he starts, making the nurse turn back on her heels. “Can I come along? I’m...” His words falter as he glances back toward the hospital. “I have nowhere else to go.”

“I’ll have to ask, but I don’t see why not,” she says, shielding her eyes from the sun. “It’s not as if we don’t need all the help we can get.”

Levi nods and walks after her back into the shadow of the building, resting his duffel bag on the railing of the stairs and pulling the photograph out of the stack of letters and U-Boats. He finds the bookmark and opens the book, eyes searching the page for the last sentence, the last word. Carefully, like building a house of cards, Levi puts the picture below that last line and closes the book, fingers gently brushing the cover before he puts it in the bag which he swings to his shoulder, letting himself grow breathless as he carries the crates to the truck.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

So, here it is. The last bit of Dresden.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has read the fic, everyone who has left kudos on the fic, everyone who has commented on the fic. You've kept me inspired and motivated, and you are a big part of this work getting finished. I hope it's brought you joy (and a bit of heart ache - I mean, it's me, you know) and that you've enjoyed this journey as much as I have.

A special thank you to my wonderful Eruriholics Unanimous who, since the groups glorious founding, have been a constant source of support and hilarity (as well as suppliers of tea and other incredible gifts, which have kept the spirit of eruri strong within me).

But most of all I want to thank my girlfriend and amazing beta, N. It is in no way an exaggeration to say that without her support, not a single chapter past the first one would have been written, and that none of it would have seen the light of day. She has been my muse, my inspiration, my reason to get up in the morning (to walk a few metres and sit down in my writing chair, but still). If you want to thank someone for this fic, you need to thank her just as much. This epilogue would be a pile of mismatched sentences without her, and quite frankly, so would a lot of the other chapters. So thank you, N, once again for your unwavering support and the enormous amount of time and effort you've put into making this fic what it is now. I couldn't have done it without you. I am eternally grateful.

So, here it finally is. I hope you enjoy it.

His alarm rings at five, a loud, rattling noise that makes him roll over in his bed and slam his hand on the timepiece. He sits up, bare feet brushing the cool floor of polished wood while he takes a few steady breaths, listening to the clanking of the tram that mixes with the sounds carrying in from the nearby building site. The rest of the city sleeps on as Levi gets to his feet with a frown-laced groan, rubbing at his aching back as he walks into the bathroom.

He shaves and dresses before heading downstairs; the bread needs to get started first but, just like every morning, he walks into the shop to wipe the dust off the little table by the window. Like every morning, he straightens the picture frames, barely even looking at them as he lights the candle, taking a moment to dust the aged pages of the linen-covered book before getting into the kitchen to start the day's work. His mind wanders as he kneads the dough, and he remembers the man is coming to talk about the bathroom today. Levi glances at the clock above the swinging doors – hours to go still.

While the bread dough is proving, he moves on to the gugelhupf, but this morning – for whatever reason – it refuses to rise. Levi decides to leave it; the stock needs to get done for the soup. He uses onion, garlic, carrots, celery, chicken bones and sprigs of herbs, frying them in a large pot before pouring in the water and leaving it to simmer. He shapes the loaves of bread and leaves them to rise, walking back out into the shop to wipe down the tables and to sweep the floor, to fill the tea jars that are starting to look empty. He gives the teapots a quick once over, carries the cups and plates out from the drying racks in the back, puts the loaves into the masonry oven and opens the kitchen window to let in a bit of cooler air; the summer has been colder than the previous ones, and with the oven going all day, Levi doesn't miss the heat.

He has just had the chance to get the porridge on the stove and to eat his own breakfast when the pastry delivery arrives, keeping him busy laying out slices of cakes and tarts next to biscuits and Danish pastries before rushing back into the kitchen to make sure the plate isn't too hot for the porridge. He gets the breakfast bowls ready, replaces the baked loaves of bread with unbaked ones in the oven, seasons the porridge, accepts the milk and cream delivery, arranges the outdoor seating, and opens the shop at two minutes past eight.

They arrive soon after, each passing him with the usual "Shalom aleichem" as they make their way to the corner table. Levi nods his response while he brews the tea; they've never asked for anything but Earl Grey since their first visit and most mornings he has it ready before they get there. He carries it over with three white cups on saucers, they thank him from the midst of their discussion and ask him to join them, but Levi shakes his head and disappears into the kitchen again to get the last of the bread out of the oven. Frau Wegner arrives promptly at twenty past eight and Levi helps her to the table by the window before getting her her usual breakfast of porridge with milk and sugar and a cup of Darjeeling with two butter biscuits. Other customers follow her: Frau Denker, who barely has time for her usual cup of Assam before rushing off to teach her classes, Herr Delbrück, whose dog eats more than half his biscuits, some students of the Freie Universität.

The contractor gets to the shop at nine, and Levi curses having to ask him to wait, offering him a complimentary cup of tea and a pastry; even so, he doesn't look pleased with the delay. When Eren finally gets to work at ten minutes' past, Levi catches him trying to skulk to the kitchen without him noticing.

"You're late," he points out as Eren shrugs out of his jacket and hangs it up before grabbing his apron.

"Yes," he mutters, putting his apron on backwards, taking it off and putting it back on, making a hasty bow with the straps.

"Again."

"I know," Eren comments, rolling up his sleeves and washing and drying his hands quickly at the sink.

"I told you the contractor was coming in this morning," Levi keeps on scolding him, though he knows it makes little difference. "I had to ask him to wait."

“Sorry, I overslept,” Eren explains, managing to look apologetic for long enough to make Levi sigh with exasperation.

“Go mind the shop while I settle things upstairs,” he orders quickly, checking the stock and porridge in passing as he follows Eren and invites the contractor up to the apartment.

“So just the bathroom then, Herr Ackerman?” the man asks him and Levi nods as he turns on the lights in the small room.

“Yes,” he replies. “Just the bathroom.”

“Alright,” the contractor huffs, pulling out a measure and stepping over the threshold. “And you said you want the tub along the back wall here?”

“Yes,” Levi says again, walking up to the contractor. “I know it’ll take up most of the space, but I’m not bothered by that.”

“Uh-huh,” the man agrees, taking a few measurements before rubbing the back of his head. “Well, you’re right about that. The model you had in mind won’t leave you with much room for anything else.”

“Like I said, I don’t mind,” Levi repeats. “It will fit, won’t it?”

The contractor turns to look at the doorframe and scratches his head again, scrunching up his face. “Well, we’ll most likely need to assemble the shower bits once it’s past the door to get it in here, but yes, it should fit.”

“Good,” Levi says, allowing a smile and a small sigh of relief. “Did you bring the tile samples we talked about?”

The contractor nods and walks back into the bedroom, lifting a briefcase onto the bed and opening it, handing Levi the three options for the floor: grey, white and peach. He starts putting them on the floor by the tub one by one, trying to see which one of them pleases his eye the most, but it’s difficult to say much based on one tile.

“You don’t want to ask your wife about that?” the contractor asks after a while, passing Levi the wall tiles when he asks for them: dark green and two different shades of blue.

“No,” Levi replies, matching the wall tiles with the floor tiles; nothing goes with the peach coloured one. “I’m not married.”

“Oh,” the man utters, sounding genuinely surprised. “I’m sorry, it’s just very... clean in here.”

“I’ve got hands, don’t I?” Levi mutters, holding the tiles against the wall one by one and squinting at them, as if narrowing his eyes will make the decision easier.

“Sure, sure,” the contractor agrees. “I just thought... The model you requested of the bathtub... Well, it’s usually the wives who like that one.”

“The bath won’t care who sits in it,” Levi says, placing the grey tile on the floor and leaning the dark green against the wall before taking a step back. “I’ll get clean just the same.”

“With this tub you certainly will, Herr Ackerman,” the contractor admits, accepting the tiles Levi passes to him.

“I like the grey for the floor and the green for the walls,” he says, glancing back toward the bathroom like hoping it will tell him whether he’s made the right choice, “but I want tiles only on the bottom half and wallpaper for the rest.”

“We have a few books of samples back at the office,” the contractor tells him. “You can come by and have a look whenever we’re open.”

They walk back down the stairs and take a seat at one of the tables to discuss the schedule and price; Levi haggles until the contractor raises his hands as a sign of surrender and sighs.

“It’s always dangerous, doing business with your lot,” the man says, his expression going from hilarity to horror in the second it takes Levi to frown. “Not that I mean anything bad by it.”

“Of course not,” Levi says, catching the contractor glancing at the old men behind him before his gaze starts travelling around the room.

“Ever thought about fixing up the shop?”

Levi looks around himself, at the old cash register he got for next to nothing at an auction across town some years ago, to the shelves behind the counter which he nailed to the wall himself the night he bought the place, to the floors he had waxed just two years ago. His eye catches the small piece of paper he has folded under one of the legs of a table to keep it level, and he grits his teeth for a second.

“It’s rustic,” he tells the contractor, folding up the paperwork that shows what they agreed on. “Just the bathroom upstairs for now.”

Levi stands up and shakes the man’s hand; he looks relieved to get out of the shop.

“Are you sure about this renovation thing, uncle Levi?” Eren asks him when he walks behind the counter to staple the papers together. “I mean, there are so many other things that you could do with that money.”

“I’m not getting a jukebox, Eren,” Levi tells him at once, frowning as the usual gaggle of noisy students pushes into the shop; the one with the round glasses holds up yet another flyer, waiting for Levi to nod and roll his eyes before pushing past Frau Wegner to stick the sheet of paper onto the window.

Eren lets out a melodramatic sigh and shakes his head. “You’ll see, soon they’ll have music playing in all the cafés and—”

“Still a tearoom, not a café.”

“—and people will start to wonder why we don’t have any music playing, and they’ll think it’s because we’re out of touch with the times.”

“They can think what they like,” Levi says. “I’m not getting a jukebox.”

He leaves Eren in charge of the shop to go prepare the soup and take care of the dishes when he gets the chance, not realising how long he’s spent in the kitchen until Mikasa shows up for her shift an hour before they start serving lunch. When he sees the tight-fitted jeans she’s wearing, he nearly drops the bowl he’s washing.

“And you think that’s appropriate, do you?” he asks her in a grunt as she puts on her apron and sighs.

“They’re just trousers, uncle,” she tells him sourly as he shakes his head.

“You think it’s only those damned penniless students who have their tea here?” Levi demands, drying his hands. “The older people expect to see—”

“What? A skirt?” Mikasa interrupts him and Levi shrugs.

“If not a skirt then at least something you wouldn’t wear while you clean a cowshed,” Levi tells her grimly. “I swear, between what you wear and Eren with this jukebox nonsense, I feel like you’re trying to turn this place into a discotheque.”

“I’m surprised you even know that word,” Mikasa mutters. “You should go join your friends at the corner table, uncle. I’m sure they’re having a great debate over kosher cheese.”

Levi clicks his tongue and turns to fight the smile off his face before asking, “Do you know what this jukebox thing with Eren is?”

“The Kirssteins have one,” Mikasa explains. “Jean won’t stop bragging about it.”

“Well, you can tell Eren that there are a couple of things the Kirssteins have that we don’t, and one of those things is rats,” he tells her before turning back to cutting up the chicken, glancing at her again when she’s washing her hands. “Do you think we need a jukebox?”

Levi catches her shrug. “It’s up to you, isn’t it?”

He grunts an agreement and chops up a handful of meat, giving a few seconds’ worth of thought to Eren’s request before he remembers the shine on the tile samples and casts the whole matter of the jukebox out of his mind.

The day continues to be as normal as any other: customers come in, they compliment the tea, Frau Eichberg takes a break from her painting to enjoy the soup of the day. The candle on the side table burns out and Levi lights a new one, straightening the picture frames out of habit rather than necessity. With the lunch rush going so smoothly Levi even has time to start the gugelhupf again; this time it rises beautifully. He has just put it in the oven when Eren walks into the kitchen, loitering by the door like a nervous cat.

“New customers,” he finally says after Levi asks him what’s wrong. “They’re not German.”

“Just have them point at what they want if they don’t speak the language,” Levi tells him, passing one of the soup bowls back to Mikasa at the sink when he notices she’s missed a spot.

“Austrian,” Eren merely says, biting at the nail of his left thumb until he catches Levi’s scowl.

“What’s the problem then?”

Eren glances at Mikasa before turning his eyes on the floor and shifting his feet, looking profoundly uneasy. It’s been a while since he’s been like this and so it takes Levi a moment to think of it.

“Was someone at the camp Austrian?”

Eren and Mikasa exchange another look, but neither of them speaks; however, Levi has learned to read their silences.

“You can take your lunchbreak now,” he tells Eren, wiping his hands on a tea towel. “Keep an eye on the gugelhupf, make sure it doesn’t burn.”

“Yes, uncle,” Eren mutters when Levi passes him at the door. “They wanted Earl Grey for three. I saw them going to sit outside.”

Levi glances at the figures he can see through one of the large windows as he walks behind the counter and starts brewing the tea, placing three cups on saucers on a tray while it’s coming along. While he waits, he wipes down the counter top; Eren has spilled some tea on it, and it shows too clearly on the polish. They’ve reminded him again of how young they are, Mikasa and Eren both, how much there’s still left in them of the children they were when he first met them. He tries to remember what Kenny used to do to make him grow up so responsible – whatever it was, he clearly hasn’t been able to pass it on to Eren and Mikasa. His mind is still on the issue when he places the teapot on the tray and carries it outside.

They’re seated at a small round table: a woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses, the white of her patterned dress catching the light and making Levi squint, a young man with blond, shoulder length hair, and a man Levi guesses is the father and husband. Something about the sight of him makes Levi frown and ache, and it takes him a moment to realise it’s his missing right arm. He stops at the door and looks at the man, giving himself a second to catch all those other things that make him remember and mourn: the neatly combed hair, the broadness of the shoulders, the dark stains under his arms. Even now it’s something he does, allows himself a few seconds here and there when he sees someone with thick eyebrows or a similar nose or a smile that catches his eye. There’s more in this stranger to remind him than in most of the men he’s seen; when he turns, Levi’s gaze travels over his features, the curve of his jaw, the slope of his forehead, but it’s not until the man staggers to his feet that Levi really sees him.

“Levi?” the man asks, holding on to the frame of his chair; the sound of his voice knocks the breath out of Levi. “My God. Can it really be you?”

In an instant the tray becomes too heavy for Levi's hands and he puts it down on the nearest table, taking a step back when it all comes back to him, not starting from the day they met but backwards, from the day they parted, as if some part of Levi's mind has stayed in that moment ever since. A warm summer's day, just like this. He took a walk in the garden, lilac was in bloom, there were bomb holes around the hospital. When he came back they had taken him, had left Levi with nothing but a stolen library book that he carried with him all the way back to Berlin.

And now here he is. Erwin. His Erwin.

"I..." Levi starts, lost for words for a moment before he thinks to step forward. "Yes. It is."

Levi watches as Erwin's mouth spreads into a disbelieving smile. He hasn't changed at all, still as tall and strong, still the most handsome man Levi has ever seen. They both take a few steps toward each other and Erwin spreads his arm for an embrace but, glancing at the people behind him, Levi extends his left hand which Erwin takes after a moment of confusion. His hand is warm and big, feels the same as the first time they did this.

"My God," Erwin says again, taking another step closer. "I can't believe it. It... It's been years."

"Eleven years," Levi answers without a moment's hesitation. "Almost to the day."

"Yes," Erwin gasps. "Yes, it must be. It... It's strange but suddenly it feels like no time at all."

Levi nods and grunts, letting go of Erwin's hand to look again at the two people behind him. "Is this your family?" he asks, and it seems the question reminds Erwin that they're there.

"Yes! Excuse me," he says, walking back to the table with Levi on his heels. "I'd like you to meet my wife Imogen, and our son Armin."

Levi takes a better look at them now as he shakes their hands. They're both blond, her eyes are green while his are blue, they have the same button nose and their smiles are so pleasant that Levi can't help smiling too. They speak very good German, but don't sound Austrian, and if something else wasn't distracting him Levi would find that strange. He keeps glancing back at Erwin, taking in the healthy glow of a tan on his skin, the brightness of his eyes, the lingering shock and surprise in his expression.

"It's nice to meet you," Levi tells the woman and the young man, managing to keep his eyes away from Erwin for long enough to nod politely at both of them.

"Levi is..." Erwin starts, stopping to utter a quiet laugh. "We knew each other during the war."

"Really?" the young man exclaims excitedly. "You knew papa when he was a spy?"

"Yes," Levi replies, glancing at Erwin who is scratching the back of his head. "Gave him a hand with a thing or two now and then."

“A complete and utter understatement,” Erwin says. “Levi was vital to the operation. He saved my life more often than once.”

Levi clicks his tongue. “I just did the clean-up,” he says, apologising in a rush when he remembers the tea tray and hurries to carry it to the table, catching a couple waiting by the register inside the shop. “I... I should get back to work.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you from it,” Erwin replies, sounding a little anguished, glancing at his wife and son before turning back to face him; in his eyes Levi can see the same swarm of questions that is growing into a pain in his chest.

“You haven’t,” Levi says when it’s all he can think of. “I hope you enjoy the tea, and if you want anything else it’ll be on the house.”

Erwin nods, smiling again as Levi takes up the tray and hurries back to the kitchen, finding Mikasa still busy with the dishes and Eren nearly finished with his soup. He crosses the space, his vision blurring as he walks forward and leans his hands against the table. Closing his eyes, he can hear the gunshots that rang in the street behind him as he ran, he can feel the strength in his body when he prepared for the jump, he can feel Erwin bending his arm behind his back and taking the razor from him. Time blurs as Levi drowns in a flood of sounds and sensations: the smell of the garden of the cottage, the sound of the rain falling against its moss-covered roof, the knots in the wooden floor of Erwin’s apartment, the *tap tap* of the typewriter. Somewhere beyond the mist Levi can hear Mikasa asking him if he’s alright, and he opens his eyes reluctantly.

“Eren, I need you to mind the register for a while. Give the couple at the counter some biscuits free of charge, they’ve been waiting for a while,” he says, standing up straight again, pushing aside the surge of emotion that threatens to overwhelm him. “Can you handle things back here by yourself, Mikasa?”

“I think so,” she replies while Eren’s still trying to swallow a mouthful of bread. “Is there a problem?”

“No, nothing’s wrong,” Levi assures her. “The Austrian. Turns out I know him, or used to. I should go meet his family properly.”

“I still have twenty minutes left of my lunch break—”

“But he can cut it short,” Mikasa interrupts Eren, who turns to look at her in consternation. “Go talk to your friend, uncle.”

Levi gives her a grateful nod, wiping his hands on his apron though they’re clean and dry, stopping at the swinging doors to look at the three people now seated around the table by the window inside the shop, where sunshine makes their hair golden; a beautiful family. Levi makes a quick stop behind the counter, filling a plate with slices of cakes and tarts, biscuits and pastries. He carries it over to the table, taking a seat when Erwin asks him whether he can spare a moment to join them.

“This brings back memories,” Erwin says, pouring the tea, making Levi laugh when he remembers; he hasn’t thought about it in years.

“I still don’t understand how you managed to drink that coffee I made,” he counters and they both laugh more loudly, and it seems to Levi even Erwin doesn’t remember the other two people at the table until he notices them sharing a bewildered look.

“I’m sorry,” he apologises, still grinning at Levi. “It’s sort of a long story.”

“It’s such a wonderful tearoom,” Erwin’s wife says, smiling pleasantly as she changes the subject. “The concierge at the hotel said this place has the best tea in all of West Berlin.”

Levi can’t help but smile as well. “Thank you,” he says. “I’ve tried to do my best with it.”

“So it’s yours?” she asks, beaming when Levi nods. “I can see you’ve taken great care with it.”

“The name,” Erwin suddenly says. “Is it...?”

Levi nods again. “I suppose I wanted them to be a part of it somehow,” he mutters, averting his gaze not to see the sympathy in Erwin’s expression.

“Tearoom Fabel,” Erwin reads from the sign above the counter. “It’s a wonderful tribute. I’m sure they would be very grateful.”

“I’m sure they both would’ve had better suggestions,” Levi says, imagining Farlan rolling his eyes at the sign, and Isabel shoving a list of names in his face. The image is bittersweet and painful, and makes Levi want to change the subject. “What brings you back to Berlin?”

“Armin just finished at university,” Erwin explains, looking at his son with unrivalled pride, “so we’re taking a little trip across the continent. I wanted to show him and Idgie where I lived during the war.”

“How long are you staying?”

“We got here three days ago,” Erwin’s wife says, “and we’re leaving tomorrow.”

Levi looks quickly at Erwin, feeling a sudden pang of emotion but pushing it quickly aside. “It’s a shame you didn’t come by on your first day,” he says. “I hope you’ve had time to see everything you wanted to.”

“It’s been fantastic,” the young man exclaims. “West Germany is so much more modern than England. Change is so much faster here, you’ve made such swift progress since the war. It’s a marvel.”

“Erm... Sure,” Levi agrees, frowning. “I guess you’re not going to—?”

“Sadly, no,” Erwin admits, “though the Altstadt is probably still not what it used to be.”

“Probably not,” Levi says, remembering the raging fires they left behind, the smell of smoke in the air, the reflection of the inferno playing on the surface of the Elbe; another thing he’s buried long ago.

“Were you in Dresden with papa on the night of the bombing?” Erwin’s son asks him next; the words make Levi flinch. “How did you escape? Did papa help you? Did you ever go back there afterwards?”

Levi glances at Erwin, who looks almost as uncomfortable as he feels. “It’s kind of a long story,” Levi starts, pausing to clear his throat. “It’s... difficult to talk about.”

“Oh, I’m sorry!” the young man exclaims now. “I hope you didn’t take any offence from my—”

“Armin, dear?” Erwin’s wife interrupts him, smiling and placing her hand on his arm. “Could you get me a glass of cold water, please?”

The young man glances at Levi again before turning back to his mother and nodding. Levi watches him as he walks across the room over to the counter.

“I’m sorry,” Erwin says, drawing Levi’s attention again and exchanging a look with his wife. “Sometimes when he gets excited he can be a bit...”

“Inconsiderate,” she finishes, looking after her son who seems to have gotten into a conversation with Eren by the register.

“My father always said that there is no such thing as being too curious,” Erwin says. “But Armin... Well, I think it says a lot that he doesn’t even think of this trip as a holiday as much as he does as an opportunity to learn. He said he wants to discover as much about people’s attitudes to the war as he can while he travels. It holds some strange fascination for him.”

“I see,” Levi comments, not really knowing what else to say. “He might find that not a lot of people like talking about it.”

“I told him as much,” Erwin agrees, laughing quietly, “but he’s young and enthusiastic and I’m not sure he wants to listen to me.”

“That seems to be going around,” Levi mutters, looking over at Eren before turning to Erwin’s wife. “Is this your first time in Berlin?”

She shakes her head. “I did visit once, a long time ago, but so much has changed that it might as well be.”

Levi nods, tries to think of a question to follow up with but finds nothing. A silence falls on the table, only broken by the clinking of cups on saucers when Erwin and his wife drink their tea. Levi folds his hands onto his lap, not knowing what to say or do, until a loud crash from behind the counter sends him to his feet.

“How can you come here and ask me something like that?!” Eren yells as Levi rushes over to him, past Armin who has taken a few hasty steps backwards. “You can’t just say whatever

comes to your mind! What's wrong with you?!"

"I'm..." Levi can hear Armin muttering. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Eren!" Levi barks as he grabs him by the arm. "Upstairs. Now."

"I'm not crazy!" Eren tells him as Levi drags him into the stairwell. "He shouldn't have asked me something like that! Who does he think he is, coming here and—"

"I know," Levi says, getting into the apartment and sitting Eren down in the kitchen. "You're not crazy. But you need to calm down."

Eren pushes his hands into his hair and leans onto his knees, breathing out heavily just as Mikasa runs into the room. She kneels in front of him and takes his hands into hers, forcing him to face her. Levi watches them for a moment as they whisper something to each other, finally crouching down to ask Mikasa if she has things covered before returning downstairs; she's the only one who can help Eren, in any case.

"I'm sorry about that," Levi tells Erwin and his family. "Eren is—"

"No, I'm sorry!" Armin exclaims, his face red and his expression anguished. "I should have thought about what I was saying before I said it! Please, do you think it would be alright if I... I mean, I want to apologise."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Levi says, scratching the back of his head. "Eren usually needs a bit of time to calm down before he can—"

"But I have to tell him how sorry I am!"

"Armin, dear," Erwin's wife says. "Perhaps it would be best to listen to Herr Ackerman on this."

"You could come by tomorrow and apologise," Levi suggests and Armin turns to Erwin.

"Do we have time for that?" he asks; Erwin looks uncertain.

"You might just make it before the train leaves," he replies, "if you don't have breakfast at the hotel."

"Eren has the morning shift tomorrow," Levi tells them all, "and we serve breakfast until eleven."

"See, darling? You can come back in the morning," Erwin's wife says; her son looks only a little less upset after it. "Oh, I hope you'll feel better before the concert. Would you like to go back to the hotel before and have a little rest?"

"The concert," Erwin suddenly groans. "I'd completely forgotten."

Levi glances up at him before turning his eyes on the tips of his shoes, feeling suddenly embarrassed. He doesn't know why he thought they'd have more time, or what he thought

having more time would accomplish.

“Perhaps you should stay.”

Levi looks up at Erwin’s wife who is smiling politely.

“You two obviously have a lot to talk about, and who knows when another opportunity will present itself,” she goes on, meeting Levi’s gaze, her expression full of kindness. “It would be a shame for you to miss this.”

“Are you sure?” Erwin asks her, looking torn as he glances back at Levi. “We bought those tickets months ago. You’ve both been looking forward to it for—”

“And how long did you say it’s been since you two last saw each other?” she asks him back. “Armin and I will be fine by the two of us. Really, you should stay.”

Erwin turns to Levi and smiles. “Do you think you’d have time for me?” he asks.

Levi turns his eyes back on the floor and tries not to let the question sink too far in. “Well,” he starts, “I guess I could arrange something.”

“It’s settled then!” Erwin’s wife says, beaming. “Armin and I will go have a rest at the hotel and head out to dinner before the concert. You two just... have a good long talk.”

Levi walks back behind the counter, first cleaning up the mess Eren made and then tending to the customers; whenever he’s not looking over his shoulder at the door to the stairwell, his eyes keep shifting to Erwin as he says his goodbyes to his wife who kisses him on the cheek before putting on her hat and sunglasses; the gesture makes Levi frown, a sudden reminder of how different things really are now. While Levi’s busy watching Erwin having a word with his son, Mikasa walks back into the shop, still looking slightly worried.

“How’s Eren?” Levi asks her and she shrugs.

“He’ll be down in a minute,” she tells him. “He’s calmer now, so he can get back to work.”

“Good,” Levi huffs, looking again over at Erwin. “Can you—”

“Sure,” Mikasa agrees at once. “Go sit with your friend, uncle. And you should eat something, you haven’t had your lunchbreak yet.”

He nods at her with a grunt and wipes his hands on a tea towel, drawing a deep breath before crossing the room and tapping Erwin on the arm, rousing him from staring after his family as they leave the tearoom. He turns to face Levi, they both wear smiles that turn into nervous laughter when the next move keeps evading them.

“Have you had lunch?” Levi finally asks. “The soup of the day is chicken and leek.”

“That sounds delicious,” Erwin replies and before he can continue, Levi has guided him back to the table and disappeared into the kitchen. He returns with two bowls of soup and a

basketful of bread with butter, sitting down across from Erwin, meeting his gaze. At the sight of that blue, Levi shudders. At the first smile, the rest of the tables become empty.

“I don’t know where to start,” Erwin admits, sounding sheepish and uncertain as he stirs his soup. “The way we parted was... It left so many strings untied.”

“Yes,” Levi agrees, not returning to that day in his mind anymore; God knows he’s done that often enough in his dreams. “You were there one minute and gone the next.”

Erwin laughs quietly and scratches the back of his head. It’s only then that Levi begins to notice all the little things that are different about him: the wrinkles in the corners of his eyes that before only came out when he smiled but are now a permanent fixture, how much lighter his hair is, how the sinews and veins in his hand stick out against his skin. He’s gained a bit of weight too, there’s a roundness about him that Levi doesn’t remember; in his memories Erwin is either strong and commanding or thin and haggard, and he takes a moment to relish this – a sign of a comfortable life.

“How did you...” Erwin starts, loses his way, looks over at Levi and laughs again. “You came back to Berlin.”

“I did,” Levi says, frowning as a few more half-forgotten images flash through his mind, “though it took me a while.”

“I only realised when they were taking me away that we never discussed it,” Erwin goes on, sounding a touch troubled even now, “what you should do after I was gone. Did you stay on at the hospital?”

Levi shakes his head. “There was a transport for volunteers not long after you left,” he explains, remembering the long, bumpy ride across the country. “I went with them, to a displaced persons camp. I figured it was as good a place for me as any at the time.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, smiling, though not happily. “I’m sorry. I always felt I should have done more to make sure your things were in order. I didn’t mean to leave you so...”

“Homeless?” Levi suggests, flinching at the guilt on Erwin’s face. “It’s alright. And besides, what could you have done?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Erwin agrees hesitantly. “It’s kept me up at night, not knowing what happened to you.”

Levi wants to say he’s felt the same, but the words get stuck in his throat. It’s all he can do to force out the question, “What about you? They didn’t want to keep you locked up forever?”

“I was pardoned in 1948,” Erwin explains, and Levi feels like sighing with relief; only three years. “I suppose I got lucky that someone decided to review my case.”

“So you’re happy about it?” Levi asks to confirm, remembering the guilt Erwin felt. “Being free?”

Erwin takes a moment before replying. “It’s not really for me to decide what my own punishment should be,” he says quietly. “I’ve since found out that many of the people I helped escape have since been discovered and brought to justice, which helps me sleep more soundly at night.”

“Good,” Levi voices. “I never liked you blaming yourself for that, you know. If anything it was my fault.”

“Your fault?” Erwin asks, his thick brows drawing to a frown. “How on earth could it have been your fault?”

Even after all these years, the words hurt.

“Well,” Levi starts, clearing his throat. “You remember that mission – when I delivered that package to Osterhaus. If I hadn’t said the package was from you, none of what came after would’ve–”

“But you can’t blame yourself for that,” Erwin says, in disbelief, like it’s the most ludicrous thing he’s heard. “I sent you in practically entirely unprepared. I treated you like a soldier, as if you had undergone the same training I did. I should never have put you in that position.”

Levi stares at Erwin for a moment without speaking before he lets out a dry little laugh. “Well,” he starts, “maybe it was just... one of those things.”

Erwin laughs too. “Yes,” he says, “I suppose it was.”

They both fall quiet for a moment during which Levi looks at anything besides Erwin, from his bowl of soup to the old men in the corner. He catches Eren walking to the kitchen and gives him a quick nod, which the young man answers in kind.

“Is he alright?” Erwin asks and Levi nods.

“He gets upset sometimes,” he explains, turning back to the man. “It’s a long story.”

“I didn’t mean to pry,” Erwin hurries to say, but Levi shakes his head.

“You didn’t,” he assures, trying to think of a quick change of subject. “How’s the soup?”

“It’s exquisite,” Erwin tells him, smiling.

Behind them, the old men get up from their table and start walking toward the door, distracting Levi from watching Erwin. Three times he mutters “Aleichem shalom”, following them with his eyes as they exit the tearoom; men old beyond their years.

“Friends of yours?” Erwin asks, making Levi laugh.

“Regulars,” he corrects the man. “They come in here almost every morning and spend half a day sitting in the corner talking, ordering nothing but a pot of tea – almost more trouble than they’re worth.”

“What do they talk about?”

“About whether they should stay or go to Israel, mostly,” Levi explains quickly, scoffing. “It’s always the same. Is there a place for Jews in Europe anymore? What’s the latest from the World Jewish Congress? Is Israel too unstable? Is it worth living through more war to live in the promised land?” He shakes his head. “They ask me for my opinion too sometimes.”

“And what do you say?” Erwin asks now and Levi rolls his eyes.

“That I wouldn’t spend a single bit of my spare change to go anywhere near that big sandbox,” he replies. “See, I’ve turned into my uncle Kenny. They had to drag him out kicking and screaming too.”

“So you feel good about it? Living here?”

Levi shrugs. “It’s as good as any other place,” he states, looking around himself. “I’ve managed to build a life for myself here, in any case.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, looking around himself as well. “I hope you know I agree with Idgie. It’s a wonderful tearoom.”

Levi smiles, taking a moment to decipher the pet name. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “I’ve grown attached to it – for better or for worse.”

“I suppose that kind of fear never really goes away,” Erwin says, his sad smile suddenly reminding Levi that he lived through most of it too, the rise of Hitler, the triumph of hate and ignorance.

“No,” Levi agrees quietly; he still hasn’t gotten onto a train since he left Berlin near two decades ago. “No, it doesn’t.”

They continue in this vein for a long time, talking about politics and how the world has changed, about nothing in particular and nothing too personal. Levi keeps watching Erwin when he talks, relishing every smile though he doesn’t understand why they make him feel so good now when so much time has passed, when he has let go of so much to be able to build something new. Levi doesn’t notice how late it’s gotten until Eren’s shift ends and he looks around at the half-empty tables and puts a sign in the window that lets people know he’s closing the tearoom early. He sends Mikasa home with Eren as well once the last of the customers have emptied their cups and left.

“Is there anything else you’d like?” Levi asks Erwin from behind the counter. “I could make us another pot of tea.”

“Yes,” Erwin replies, smiling. “I’d like that.”

Levi brews the tea after a quick nod, cutting them each a slice of gugelhupf before grabbing a bottle of liquor and two glasses on a whim and returning to the table. They drink and the silence returns, broken only by the sound of Levi clearing his throat as the alcohol burns its

way down to his stomach. He glances at Erwin in passing, taking a bite of his slice of cake as he tries to find words to form his questions.

“I’ve not had many gugelhupfs in my day,” Erwin says suddenly, “but this one is excellent.”

“It’s Farlan’s mother’s recipe,” Levi tells him, smiling wistfully. “He told me once that it never let him down.”

“Did he give it to you before—”

Levi shakes his head. “I tracked down his family after I moved back here. His mother passed away before the war ended but his father is still alive.”

“Did you tell him what happened?” Erwin asks after a moment’s hesitation and Levi nods.

“He didn’t want to know the details,” he explains, “but he was relieved to finally find out what had happened to Farlan after he left Berlin. He still comes by the shop sometimes – I guess it’s the closest thing to a grave he has.”

Erwin nods pensively and they finish their slices of cake in silence. Levi can tell Erwin’s thinking about him too, about him and Isabel, perhaps reliving that night in the woods. Levi glances behind himself at the candle still burning on the side table before turning back to Erwin.

“Do you think about that time much?” he asks, not sure why he feels relieved when Erwin shakes his head.

“No,” he replies, taking another gulp of his drink. “Not much.”

Levi agrees in a grunt. “I guess you have to leave some things behind,” he mutters, “to be able to move forward.”

“Yes,” Erwin says, staring at the surface of the table with a strange look on his face. “Though there’s a lot that one simply can’t forget. I’ve found it... bubbles up from time to time.”

“It’s good to keep busy,” Levi says, looking around at the tearoom as Erwin laughs.

“I’m not surprised to hear that’s your solution,” he remarks, and Levi coughs out a laugh as well.

“I guess I was always like that, even before,” he admits and frowns. “I didn’t ask you about what you’re doing these days yet.”

“I occupy a small role in the Ministry of Education,” Erwin tells Levi who feels another wave of relief. “I find the work very rewarding – and not only because I know my father would’ve approved.”

“He was a teacher, wasn’t he?” Levi asks, answering Erwin’s nod with the same. “I’m glad you’ve found something you enjoy.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, “though I must admit, I don’t exactly work out of necessity. I inherited a fair bit of money from my father’s side of the family, but you know me – I was never one to live lavishly.”

In a flash Levi remembers Erwin’s apartment, the comfortable simplicity of it, and he nods. “Good for trips like this, though,” he remarks and Erwin laughs.

“I’m glad I could give Armin this,” he says. “While I was in prison my prospects looked very bleak. I couldn’t have imagined being able to provide my family with such opportunities.”

Levi nods, but doesn’t know what to say, though he knows he’s waited for this chance to ask Erwin about his wife and son. He’s afraid the words would come out wrong, like an accusation, and Erwin’s never owed him anything, not the truth, not even an explanation. He empties his glass and pours himself another, topping off the other man’s as well though he doesn’t ask for it.

“I feel as though maybe...” Erwin starts, avoiding Levi’s gaze when their eyes meet. “I know it’s been years since we saw each other, but still, I wouldn’t want you to get the wrong impression about... how things were between us.”

Levi frowns but doesn’t speak, allowing Erwin to continue.

“I was afraid that maybe...” he starts again before pausing. “Imogen and I got married seven years ago. Armin is her son from a previous marriage.”

Levi puts down the cup he’s been about to raise to his lips. “Oh,” he voices, not knowing what else to say.

“I was afraid that maybe you thought...” Erwin says, shaking his head. “Well, I was afraid that maybe you thought I was already married when we met, and thought less of me for it.”

“No, I...” Levi starts but falls silent, hesitating for a moment. “You don’t owe me any explanations, you know.”

“I know,” Erwin says, “but I wouldn’t want you to think that I lied to you.”

Levi shakes his head before uttering a laugh. “Congratulations,” he says with a smile which Erwin answers.

“Thank you. I really care for her a great deal.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Levi says, emptying his glass again. “Where did you two meet?”

“Imogen was involved with a charity that provided some of the prisoners with someone to talk to,” Erwin explains, his expression growing softer from the memories. “Her husband had been imprisoned at the start of the war, and unfortunately he passed away during his incarceration. She knew the loneliness, and decided to volunteer to ease it for the men who were still serving their sentences.”

“She sounds like a kind person,” Levi tells Erwin, whose smile widens. “I’m happy you’ve found someone who’s so good to you.”

“I have much to be thankful for,” Erwin agrees, placing his hand around his cup of tea. For a moment Levi fears he’s going to ask him whether he’s found someone himself, but in the end Erwin merely says, “I’ve tried to do my best with Armin, to make him feel I think of him as my own son. The fact he calls me ‘papa’ is very encouraging.”

“He seems like a good kid,” Levi says. “I can imagine you were once like that.”

Erwin laughs. “Perhaps I was,” he says. “Don’t we all start to resemble our parents sooner or later?”

“I don’t know about all of us,” Levi replies, “but I sure as hell am starting to resemble my uncle Kenny. I see it all the time with Eren and Mikasa, the way I complain about everything they do.”

“Do they live with you?” Erwin asks and Levi shakes his head.

“They used to, for a couple of years,” he explains, taking a sip off his drink. “Her last name is Ackerman, if you can believe it. That’s why they contacted me when they found her in an orphanage in a displaced persons camp – thought we might be related, and with Kenny never telling me anything about my family, I reckoned we might as well be, so I took her in. She wouldn’t go anywhere without Eren, so he came along as well.”

“How old were they?”

“Thirteen,” Levi says, “though they always seemed both older and younger than that. They found them in Bergen-Belsen, and from what I was told they were more animals than people at that point, living off God knows what and stealing whatever they could get their hands on.”

“I’ve visited a few of the children’s homes in England,” Erwin tells Levi. “The number of children we’ve been able to take in is woefully small. How are they doing now?”

Levi shakes his head. “To be honest, they’ve been more a comfort to each other than I’ve been able to be to either one of them,” he says. “They know they can talk to me about all of it, but they haven’t, not really.”

“I can’t even imagine–”

“Before they came to live with me, I was told of an incident that happened at the camp,” Levi goes on; he’s never been able to tell anyone before. “When they were being taken away from the camp by some soldiers, they came across one of the guards and attacked him – no hesitation, stabbed him to death with some old spoons and forks they’d found somewhere and sharpened.”

Erwin’s mouth forms a tight line; Levi can tell he’s looking for something appropriate to say and decides to put him out of his misery. After all, what can anyone say after something like that? He certainly couldn’t think of anything when he first heard the story.

“They’re good kids,” he says, “and I’m glad I’ve been able to give them a home, for what it’s worth. They got their own place a few years ago. I don’t think either one of them knows what they want to do with their lives, but I don’t mind having them work here until they figure it out.”

“They’re lucky to have you,” Erwin tells him, smiling gently. “I’m sure you help them more than you think.”

“It hasn’t always been easy,” Levi confesses. “They were really troubled when they came here, and even now I’m not always as good to them as I probably should be.”

“There’s nothing else anyone can do than his best,” Erwin says. “I’m sure they know how much you care. A lot of the time that’s enough.”

Levi grunts in agreement and sips at his drink, giving Erwin directions when he excuses himself to use the bathroom. Levi spends a moment looking after him when he disappears into the stairwell before getting to his feet, feeling the heat of the liquor on his cheeks as he gathers up the cups and plates and carries them into the kitchen. Erwin finds him there a little while later, up to his elbows in dishwater.

“I just need to get these done,” Levi tells him over his shoulder. “I’ll be out in a minute.”

When he walks back into the shop, Levi finds Erwin by the side table, looking at the pictures Levi’s placed next to the candle. He joins the man slowly, gazing down at the photograph of Kenny and his mother for a moment before moving on to the other one, of a young man with his hair up in a stylish quiff. It feels like the first time he’s looked at it in years.

“His father gave me that,” Levi explains when Erwin picks up the picture frame. “He thought I’d like to have something to remember him by. See? Even in the picture he looks worried about something.”

“That’s right, he does,” Erwin says, looking down at the hint of a frown young Farlan is wearing on his face, before putting down the photograph.

“I put an advert in the paper back in the day to find someone who might have known Isabel, but no one ever got back to me,” Levi says, pulling forward the small wooden box on the table and opening it. “I still have all of these though.”

Erwin lifts up one of the newspaper clippings and holds it gently. The paper has started to grow yellow, the edges have wrinkled with rain, but the picture is still clear; a U-Boat photographed at a marina somewhere before it set out to sea.

“You can even see her notes in the margin,” Levi says, pointing out the words Isabel has pencilled onto the page at a moment of boredom. “I had Farlan’s letters in here as well, but I gave them to Christofer.”

“Christofer?” Erwin asks, looking up from the clipping to catch Levi’s nod.

“I don’t know if you remember, but they were... well, I don’t really know what they were,” Levi explains. “Turns out Christofer made it through the war, and when he started looking for Farlan, his father sent him here. I thought he should get the letters, since they were all addressed to him anyway. I never even read them myself. I asked Farlan’s father if he’d like to have them, but he said he doesn’t want to remember his son that way.”

“So you met him then?” Erwin asks, and Levi nods again.

“I’ve never seen a person break down like that,” he mutters, remembering the tears streaming down the man’s face. “He wanted to know how it happened, so I told him, said it was quick, that he didn’t suffer.”

Erwin nods sombrely and places the newspaper clipping back into the box with the others. He turns to the small linen-covered book, picks it up and flips through the pages.

“And what’s this?” he asks Levi, who merely shrugs.

“Just a book,” he says, though he knows he’s marked down the page and the line, and he doesn’t really understand why he’s just lied to Erwin. “Another drink?”

They sit back down at the table and Levi fills their glasses, glancing up at Erwin’s face as he drinks, taking in more of the subtle changes, marvelling at how the man is still himself and still so different. There’s something softer in his expression now than before; the war has disappeared from his features, though the years of danger and concern have marked him with lines, by his mouth, on his forehead, in the space between his thick brows. Their eyes meet and they both smile again, and suddenly Levi can feel that familiar racing in his chest; another memory of a long lost time.

“Did you ever find out what happened to the others?” Levi asks to break the silence. “To Nanaba, or Hange, or Marie?”

“I actually received a letter from Marie some years ago,” Erwin says. “We’ve kept in touch since then. She’s well, and so is little Sofie. Nile also survived the war, I’m happy to say.”

“It’s good to hear that,” Levi remarks. “I’m not sure we would have made it without her.”

“I can pass along your regards to her, if you’d like,” Erwin promises. “As for the others, I’ve heard nothing.”

Levi nods. “I think it’s only natural to lose touch, and to leave it like that,” he says. “I guess we all remind each other of something we’d rather forget.”

“Still, I’m glad to have known them all, if even for a short time,” Erwin adds. “They were some of the best people I’ve ever met. Mike and Nanaba, Hange and Moblit. Isabel and Farlan.”

Levi agrees in a low hum and laughs quietly. “I remember when Isabel first saw Mike,” he recounts. “He’d sneaked into the apartment in the middle of the night to fetch Nanaba. Isabel called him a giant.”

Erwin laughs as well, his expression both warm and sad. “Do you think it’s possible,” he starts, “to remember them but forget the rest?”

Levi thinks about the question for a moment before saying, “Perhaps, in glimpses at least.”

“There is much that I prefer to leave behind,” Erwin tells him, meeting his gaze, “and still so much that I never want to forget.”

Levi keeps looking at Erwin until the pain in his throat forces him to turn back to his drink. “Speaking of finding people,” he starts, coughing a little, “they found my uncle Kenny.”

“Alive?” Erwin asks, frowning when Levi nods.

“God knows how he did it,” he says. “I was working at a displaced persons camp when one of the new volunteers said he’d been at another camp near Berlin and met a man there with my last name – thought we might be related, and it turned out it was Kenny.”

“How was he?” Erwin asks now. “I’d imagine after something like that he’d be...”

“He was,” Levi agrees, though Erwin doesn’t finish his sentence. “His health was failing even when I got to him, he’d lost all his teeth and there wasn’t a bone in his left hand or arm that hadn’t fixed itself wrong. The doctors said his body was closer to that of a ninety-year-old’s than a man’s who was in his fifties.” Levi pauses to refill his glass. “I moved back to Berlin with him, took care of him until he died. In truth we’d probably have been better off staying in the camp, with how things were, but he wanted to come back home.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Erwin says, looking at Levi with enough sympathy to make him ache all over again.

“He was ready to go by the end. Told me so himself more often than once,” Levi says. “Said he could finally go on his own terms, so it wasn’t so bad. I got him a rabbi and a proper funeral, like he said he wanted.”

“It can’t have been easy for you,” Erwin comments gently. “I know for a long time he was the closest thing you had to a parent. To watch him waste away must have been difficult.”

“If I’m being honest, there wasn’t ever much time to think about something like that,” Levi confesses. “Those years were tough. There wasn’t enough of anything in the city. Just making sure we had something to eat and a roof over our heads was a struggle.”

“I heard the years after the war were bad,” Erwin says. “I’m glad you came out of all of this so well.”

Levi agrees in a quiet hum, spending a few seconds thinking back to that time, the bleak rooms of their small apartment that seemed to never be warm enough for Kenny, how he’d cough his way from one building site to the next, trying to keep working, how he spent hours trying to trade whatever meagre possessions they had for food. Here, in the comfortable calm and warmth of the shop, it all seems so distant, and Levi’s grown to appreciate how well he’s

been able to forget. He looks over at Erwin, banishing the last shreds of that darkness; this isn't the time, or the place.

"It's remarkable how well you've done for yourself," Erwin says, his voice low and soft. "Though I don't want you to think I'm surprised, because I'm not – not in the least."

Levi scoffs and looks around his little tearoom again. "Thank you," he says, smiling. "I bought the place and the apartment upstairs right after rationing ended. Got a good loan – interest-free, you know, since I decided to stay on the west side."

"It seems business is booming."

"I'm a bit surprised at that myself, actually," Levi admits. "I thought I'd be struggling to make ends meet for longer. I even have enough money to start renovating the apartment."

"What did you have in mind for it?" Erwin asks, sounding genuinely interested.

"I thought about it for a long time," Levi says, "and I decided to do the bathroom first."

Erwin lets out a quiet laugh. "I remember you had a particular fondness for warm baths."

Levi laughs as well. "Haven't changed much, I'm afraid," he says. "If anything I like them even more now. I don't remember having all these aches when I was younger."

"So what sort of renovation are you planning?"

"The contractor came by earlier today, actually," Levi tells Erwin. "I chose the tiles, and we talked about where everything should go. I want..." He pauses, struggling to find the words to describe it. "You know what? How about we go upstairs and I'll show you."

It's only when they're halfway done walking up the steps that Levi looks back, suddenly feeling like he's seeing Erwin for the first time again, and his heart starts racing in his chest. He takes a moment to marvel at how gracefully Erwin's learned to move, how steady his steps are, how strong his body still looks in the narrow stairwell. They don't speak, and the lingering quiet gives Levi too much time to focus on how difficult it suddenly is to breathe, how the palms of his hands are sweating despite what he tells himself; that this means nothing, that soon they'll go back downstairs and finish their drinks, that Erwin will go back to his hotel room for the night, that tomorrow will be a day just like any other. When they walk through the bedroom, Levi can hear Erwin clearing his throat.

"I'm replacing the tub," Levi starts, noticing again the darkened cracks in the porcelain, which made him choose to fix this room up first. "The new one will be bigger, with one of those shower attachments."

"Sounds wonderful," Erwin says quietly; Levi can hear him taking a step closer. "What else?"

"I'm getting a new sink as well," Levi explains. "None of the plumbing needs fixing, which is a relief."

“So what did you decide on the tiles?”

“Grey for the floor,” Levi goes on, swallowing with effort when he feels the heat of Erwin’s body against his back. “Dark green halfway up the wall, and wallpaper for the rest.”

“It’ll be beautiful,” Erwin tells him, so close now that Levi can hear his breathing.

“I hope so,” Levi mutters, “with the amount of much money I’m—”

“Please, Levi,” Erwin suddenly whispers; Levi can feel his heart beating faster when Erwin wraps his arm around him, pulling him close. “Draw us a bath.”

Levi leans into the touch, breathing in the scent of Erwin, sweat and musk and soap, joy and pain and longing. There’s a moment of calm, of letting go, of acknowledgement, before Levi takes Erwin’s hand into his, kisses the palm, the joints, the knuckles. He looks up at the blue of Erwin’s eyes and nods without speaking, walking unhurriedly over to the tub to fill it. Levi watches Erwin undress while undressing himself, realises that there’s nothing the man needs help with anymore, and it makes him happy.

They slip into the water, as comfortable in their nakedness now as they were all those years ago. Levi lets Erwin pull him close, leaning against his broad chest as he sits between his thighs. They don’t speak, merely touch each other’s bodies gently, like reminding themselves of the things that have gotten lost in the years they’ve spent apart. Taking their time, they wash each other, letting half-forgotten memories warm the parts of them not immersed in water as their hands grow more curious, as their lips grow hungry for kisses, as the small room begins to fill with their breathless laughter. The divide disappears, there’s no more regret; just the light dancing on the surface, just the quiet dripping of the faucet, just the beads of water on their skin. Levi takes Erwin’s hand when they get out of the tub, lets the uncomplicated strength of it guide him closer, back to Erwin – back home.

They fall into bed, limbs tangled, growing more breathless every second. Levi pulls Erwin on top of him, runs his hands into the wet tousled hair, the other reaching for the swelling between his legs. He can feel Erwin’s smile against his lips when they kiss, can feel the sudden impatience in the way he moves against him, lets it settle as a restlessness in his own body. He doesn’t spend a second trying to remember what Erwin likes; it’s etched into some corner of his mind, long untouched, like a treasure lying under an unmarked grave. And he watches Erwin, looks down at his upturned face, at himself and the sight that once made him shudder from a single glance. Neither one of them lasts long, brought too close to the edge by the simple closeness, the freedom from shame, the sheer audacity of their joy. Afterward they fall into another memory; Erwin extends his arm and lets Levi lean his cheek against it, still chuckling breathlessly when he does.

“I left my clothes in a pile on the bathroom floor again,” Erwin whispers, making Levi laugh while he coughs into the palm of his hand.

“Don’t get me started,” he warns and they both laugh and cough, stopping to breathe once they’ve finally calmed down.

“We left the candle burning downstairs too,” Erwin reminds him, but Levi merely sighs.

“It’s fine,” he mutters, shifting closer to the other man. “It’s not the first time that’s happened.”

“Idgie lets me off easy, you know,” Erwin says, “compared to how you used to be.”

Levi chuckles quietly. “You know, she probably has that luxury because of how I used to be,” he points out, making Erwin laugh and rub his eyes.

“Admittedly, that’s entirely possible,” he agrees, sighing. “Who knew a year with you would end up teaching me more about cleanliness and order than all my years in the military?”

“It’s a talent,” Levi voices, turning onto his back and stretching his limbs. “I’m sure your wife has others.”

“Oh, she does,” Erwin says, smiling. “She’s a remarkable person. She’s involved with half a dozen charities at any given time. She really puts me to shame in that regard.”

“Like I said,” Levi starts, “she seems like a kind person.”

“She is – and incredibly understanding,” Erwin tells him, pausing for a moment. “Ours isn’t what you would call a traditional marriage, but we’ve found our own ways to make it work.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Erwin stays quiet for another few seconds, growing more serious. “As I said, Idgie and I met while I was still in prison, and we grew very close,” he says. “After I was released I realised I was suddenly in a position to share my life with her, to have something to offer her and her son, and I did want that, very much. But still...” Erwin takes another break and glances at Levi before continuing. “I had spent so long pretending to be someone I wasn’t and I knew I wouldn’t be able to bear it again, not even for a day. I knew if we were to marry, we would have to approach the matter from a position of complete honesty. So... I told her about you.”

“About me?” Levi asks, frowning as Erwin simply nods.

“Yes,” Erwin goes on. “I told her I respect her too much to keep something like that from her, and that I respect myself too much to pretend that side of me, along with my past, doesn’t exist. She in turn opened up to me, about how she cares for me very deeply, but how that feeling compares poorly to how she felt about her late husband. Even so, we decided to get married.”

“And you’re happy with each other?” Levi manages to ask despite the tightness in his throat, relieved to see the smile return to Erwin’s face.

“Yes, we’re very happy,” Erwin replies, “and for as long as that’s the case, we’ve decided to stay married. Should the situation ever change, should one of us find someone else who makes us feel differently, we’ll attempt to be as open and honest with each other as we have been so far.”

“I’m glad,” Levi says. “I’m happy you’ve found someone who you don’t have to lie to. I know how much it bothered you.”

“Yes,” Erwin agrees, “I’ve been very lucky in life.”

They fall quiet, drawing deep breaths, savouring every moment of closeness, every second, as long as it lasts, falling asleep in each other’s arms and waking up a few hours later, to talk, to kiss, growing desperate when no amount of touching seems enough. Levi keeps staring, can’t keep himself from staring at Erwin, his face, his body, every part of him that – against all odds – is healthy and happy and whole. He feels his heart growing full with it, with a contentment the like of which he’s never known, with something so pure he never knew someone like him could deserve it. And Erwin looks at him, still like he’s something wondrous, something strong and good, like he’s here; a person; himself.

Levi’s alarm rings at five and they push aside the covers, gather their clothes off the bathroom floor, walk back downstairs where the candle on the side table has burned down to nothing. Levi brews them a cup of tea; they drink, talking quietly, about nothing in particular now. When Erwin’s about to step out onto the street, Levi grabs a hold of his arm, keeping him at the door.

“Erwin,” he says, looking up at his face, feeling the question burning his throat. “Are you happy?”

Erwin looks back at him, surprised for a second before he smiles. “Yes, Levi. I’m happy.”

“Good,” Levi says, sighing. “I just wanted to–”

“Are you?”

Levi falls quiet, thinks about the question, and smiles. “Yes,” he says. “I’m happy too.”

“It means so much,” Erwin tells him and Levi nods, letting Erwin brush his knuckles against his cheek.

He wants to imagine the warmth of that touch lingers on his skin when he walks into the kitchen with the glasses they left on the table. He does the dishes quickly; the bread needs to be made first. His mind wanders as he kneads the dough, goes back to the previous day, to the moment he saw Erwin, to the moment they sat down together, to the moment they said goodbye. Finally, he thinks, finally those last words were not written by someone else, were not ink on a piece of paper but sound and feeling, flesh and blood, the soft touch of knuckles against his cheek. Levi presses his hand against it, feels the ache in the back of his throat, feels the heat of his tears in the corners of his eyes. They spill onto his skin, all the emotion, the relief, the overwhelming, all-encompassing relief, like the weight of the world had been lifted off his shoulders. Erwin is happy. Yes, he is happy.

Levi falls onto his knees, his body shaking with the laughter that bubbles up, fills his lungs, explodes into the room, leaves him coughing into the bend of his elbow while the tears are still falling. He looks up toward the ceiling and breathes, suddenly feeling light and empty and whole; suddenly feeling free.

When Erwin's son stops by the shop a few hours later, everything is already as it should be: the old men are sitting in their corner table, arguing over the Reparations Agreement; Frau Wegner is eating her porridge, casting sour glances at Mikasa's jeans; the students make noise in their own table where they've dragged three extra chairs though Levi keeps telling them not to move them. Armin and Eren sit for a good half an hour; Levi sighs with relief when the young man leaves without either of them causing a scene.

He visits the contractor's office on Monday, choosing a white wallpaper with a pattern of small, dark green leaves. They start working on the bathroom before the end of the week, and Levi never knew how much it would complicate things. The noise carries into the tearoom throughout the day, the workers take up space at his tables and make requests for the soup of the day according to what they like. But Levi doesn't complain, sitting at the edge of his bed at the end of each day, staring at the progress they've made. By the end of the following week, they're done, and Levi couldn't be happier with the result; everything gleams, spotless and bright, the only shiny and new thing Levi has had since Kenny gave him that new pair of shoes.

It waits for him on the counter one day when he returns to the shop from running his errands. He recognises the handwriting, remembers it from the countless hours they practiced, though it's more polished now. He tucks it away in the pocket of his apron, starting to gather cups and bowls from the tables, doing the dishes, going on with his day like it's any other day. It's only when he's closed the door and blown out the candle that Levi looks at it again, reading the neat address as he climbs up the stairs into his apartment. He puts it down onto the little stool in his bathroom while he draws a bath, undressing without hurry, catching his reflection in the art deco style mirror above the sink. Levi climbs into the tub and dries his hands on a towel, leans his arms against the cool porcelain. There, in the warm embrace of the water, Levi reads the letter, and thinks of Dresden.

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